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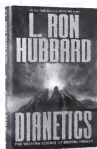
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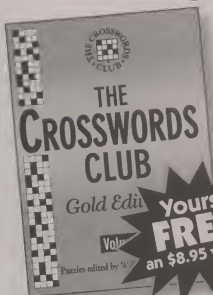
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## SCIENCE FICTION

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## NEAL BARRET, JR.

*Last spring, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America named Neal Barrett, Jr., the 2010 Author Emeritus. I was honored to be asked to introduce him at SFWA's Nebula Awards Banquet in Cocoa Beach, Florida. The following editorial is a slightly revised version of my remarks. Neal's latest story can be found on page 26.*

Possum Dark watched the van disappear into the shop. He felt uneasy at once. His place was on top. Keeping Ginny from harm. . . . Dog locked the gate and turned around. Didn't come closer, just turned.

"I'm Dog Quick, he said folding hairy arms. "I don't care much for Possums."

"I don't care for Dogs," said Possum Dark.

Dog seemed to understand. "What did you do before the War?"

"Worked in a theme park. Our Wildlife Heritage. That kind of shit. What about you?"

"Security, what else? Dog made a face. "Learned a little electrics. . . . He nodded toward the shop. "You like to shoot people with that thing?"

"Anytime I get the chance."

"You ever play any cards?"

"Some." Possum Dark showed his teeth. "I guess I could handle myself with a Dog.

"For real goods?" Dog returned the grin.

"New deck, unbroken seal, table stakes," Possum said.

Long before there was the "new weird," there was Neal Barrett, Jr. *The New York Review of Science Fiction* called Neal's 1988 story, "Stairs," "possibly the most all out weird story of the year." Being weird didn't stop "Stairs" from winning that year's Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. The aforementioned Dog Quick and Possum Dark are characters in Neal's wondrous and strange,

"Ginny Sweethearts' Flyin Circus." The wry tale of life after a nuclear war was a finalist for both the Nebula and the Hugo award. Critics have said that Neal's stories defy any category or convention, but he has also been called a poet of post-apocalyptic fiction. Neal is not afraid to explore the dark side, but Neal's versions of what follows Armageddon differ considerably from Cormac McCarthy or Neville Shute's visions of the aftermath. In an interview with Nick Gevers, Neal says, "I write deep and dark, and I write light and funny. And, they're both the same, in my mind. Tragedy contains funny; funny contains tragedy. Serious things happen to my people, and funny things as well. Like life, okay? The way I write is simply my perspective on whatever the hell this living stuff is all about."

Neal has always had a keen eye for what this "living stuff" is all about. His 1991 novel, *The Hereafter Gang*, about Doug Hoover's transition from life to death, has been called "One of the Great American Novels," by John Clute. I own the gorgeous Ziezing hardcover with the evocative triptych, and I was calling it one of the greatest novels, ever, long before I became aware of John's review.

Neal's career began over fifty years ago, when his first two SF stories appeared in the August 1960 issues of *Amazing* and *Galaxy*. Since then, he's published more than fifty books. In addition to the post-apocalyptic theme that can be found in novels like *Through Darkest America* and *Dawn's Uncertain Light*, and the personal Armageddon of *The Hereafter Gang*, these works include the "Aldair" quartet and other types of science fiction, Westerns, YA books, very strange mainstream novels like *Interstate Dreams*, *Perpetuity Blues* and other short story collections, and wildly funny novels of mystery and suspense like the unforgettable *Pink Vodka Blues*. Indeed, I often wish I inhabited the alternate universe where Whoopi Goldberg went

ahead and made that wonderful book into a movie—with or without Ted Danson.

My first memory of Neal is on an afternoon over twenty years ago. We were surrounded by the lush greenery of The Sun Garden, a bar in the Grand Hyatt in New York City, which overlooks the intricate terra cotta frieze of the Chanin Building, but we could have been anywhere. As the afternoon faded into twilight, I sat enchanted with this eloquent story-telling Texan, who, raised in Oklahoma, still thinks of that state as the last stop before Heaven. I've been enchanted by Neal's stories ever since.

So, when Armageddon arrives, other people can hit *The Road* or huddle *On the Beach*. When I face the end times, I'm looking up Ginny Sweethips and taking *The Hereafter Gang* along with me. Perhaps the end of Doug Hoover's transcendent journey will give you a little taste of why:

Doug feels the wind, he feels the power in his bones, he hears the wires begin to whine, he hears the engine start to sing. The sky is sharp and clear with a blue that hurts his eyes; the sun's as bright as silver with a shine. He sees the wonders down below, he sees the hangar and the Cord, he sees the courthouse and the creek, he sees a pretty spot of pink. He sees Immelmann and Manny up above, sees Boelcke and Doc down below. . . . Off to port he sees the Chief looking nifty in his whites, looking fine with his long hair whipping in the breeze. He gives Doug a thumbs up and neatly peels his craft away a white bird against the blue. Doug rolls and feels giddy in the head, feels dizzy as a duck . . .

And as he screams through the sky he wonders what he'd like to be, if the flute would treat him right, if the clarinet's the thing, if he could tap his way to fame. . . . He thinks he'd really try to learn, discover what it's all about, why everybody wants to go where it's nicer than the town.

He thinks . . . he'll try to understand a cat.

He thinks he might go to class, or maybe not. ○

# Asimov's

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**Stories from Asimov's have won 51 Hugos and 27 Nebula Awards, and our editors have received 18 Hugo Awards for Best Editor.**

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## THE PLOT GENIE

A long time ago—1973, as a matter of fact—Sherry Gottlieb, who used to run a science fiction bookstore in Los Angeles, gave me a copy of a book called *The Plot Genie*, which was intended, an even longer time ago, to provide writers with handy formulas for constructing stories. Sherry inscribed the book to me with these tender words: “To Bob Silverberg—I hope this helps you get through those trying times and slumps. If you learn to use this, you may be able to sell a story or something.”

I came upon it the other day in a dusty corner of my office. Apparently I haven’t been using it much in the last few decades. Of course, I don’t write as much fiction as I used to, either. But there are plenty of other writers out there trying to make a living by selling stories, and it occurred to me that knowing about this book might be of great value to them.

The copy of *The Plot Genie* that Sherry sent me back in the halcyon days of the Nixon administration is the third edition, dated 1932. The author was one Wycliffe A. Hill, described on the title page as “Author Inventor”—from other sources I learn that he wrote screenplays for silent films—and the publisher was the Ernest E. Gagnon Company of Los Angeles.

Mr. Hill tells us that about 1915 the great movie director Cecil B. de Mille rejected a story idea of his “with the kindly criticism that ‘although an interesting narrative, it contains no dramatic plot.’” This set him searching for an understanding of the difference between narrative and plot. Upon learning that someone had published a book that claimed to list all the basic dramatic situations—thirty-six in number, he tells us—he bought a copy and began “an intensive study and analysis of dramatic plot building,” which led in

1918 to his writing a book called *Ten Million Photoplay Plots*. He followed this in 1921 with *The Art of Dramatic Plot Building*, and then *The Writers’ Guide* (1925), which brought him finally to the creation of his masterpiece, *The Plot Genie*.

When I say that *The Plot Genie* offers a mechanical way to devise plots, I’m not just bandying metaphors. Inserted into the book is an actual machine, which Hill calls his “plot robot.” It’s not really a robot, and not even much of a machine: actually, it’s a cardboard envelope with a peephole in it and a circular wheel mounted inside. When you reach in and turn the wheel, a number appears in the peephole. Proper turning of the wheel will provide you with all the necessary elements of a story plot, according to a method which Hill spends 141 pages explaining.

“It may or may not have been a mistake,” he admits, “to give the name ‘Plot Robot’ to the device when it was first put on the market, inasmuch as it is not really a robot. Although resulting in a tremendous amount of newspaper and magazine publicity, it also aroused considerable resentment and suspicion among the literati, some of whom were averse to the idea of a robot’s doing intellectual work. Because of this feeling in regard to the name, it was decided to change it to ‘Plot Genie.’” So, back in 1932, hard-edged science fiction—the robot—gave way to misty fantasy—the genie!

As for using the book—well, listen up, all ye ambitious storytellers. You must first become aware of the “general formula for all types of stories,” which has nine elements, listed by Hill as LOCALE OR ATMOSPHERE, FIRST CHARACTER, THE BELOVED, A PROBLEM, OBSTACLE TO LOVE, COMPLICATION, PREDICAMENT, THE CRISIS, and CLIMAX. You turn the wheel three times to



determine each of these elements, then note the number that comes up in the peephole and hunt each one down in the text of the book. "Important!" the author warns us. "Read instructions on the following pages very carefully before attempting to build a plot with the aid of the Genie."

Shall we get started? Shall I devise a story plot before your very eyes, making use of this ingenious device?

I'll give it a try, anyway, although using the thing turns out to be immensely complicated, and I am a weary guy after having written and sold seven or eight hundred stories myself over the past fifty-five years. So it will be a struggle. "Turn the disk three times and then observe what number shows through the slot, and then write this number in the proper space on the recording sheet. After having obtained the nine numbers—and not before—refer to the index book for your corresponding plot elements, and write these on the Recording Sheet opposite the proper number. The first number obtained by turning the disk three times supplies the locale; the second gives the principal male character, the third, the beloved, and so on." It sounds like a tall order.

But here we go. I turn the disc and number 69 comes up. We are provided with a list of 180 story locales, running from "In Asia" to "At a Fraternity House." Number 69 turns out to be "At a saw mill."

Three more turns and I have my main male character—number 80, "Jazz or-

chestra leader." Three more and I am given my main female character (the "beloved")—number 58, a wizard's daughter or sister. Let her be his daughter, I decide. Now I need to find my story problem. It turns out that there are six lists of problems, and I must turn the disk until a number ending in 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 appears, which will tell me which list to use, and then turn it again to pick a number from that list. I dial up list 3, and then 46, which is "Obliged to risk health in an effort to brave an air voyage." I think a Hugo winner is shaping up already!

Onward we go. The next stop is the Obstacle. I land on 51: "Lover and beloved are brother and sister." Oh-oh—incest; big plot trouble. Incest has never been a favorite theme of science fiction editors. Perhaps a workaround will reveal itself. We keep going to Complications and I get 10, "Revenge is sought against an immortal for having brought loss of loved one." Ah, a second fantasy element! Good. Now Predicaments: "Madness or mental derangement threatens loss of power." And, for The Crisis, "Learn that a loved one is a slave to passion or habit."

What do we have so far, then? The leader of the jazz orchestra at a sawmill is in love with a wizard's daughter, and is unaware that she is actually his sister. Okay: now to put some flesh on the bones. The saw-mill is on Mars (an additional complication, because water to drive the mill is very scarce on Mars) and they find themselves obliged to

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make a perilous journey from the Central Drylands to the Western Mountains by helium balloon to thwart a diabolical immortal being who has taken the wizard's daughter's father prisoner. (The wizard was trying to obtain a coveted spell that would provide water to keep the sawmill running.) But the orchestra leader is addicted to kweesh, the sinister Martian narcotic, and has left his kweesh stash behind. He starts to go into withdrawal. As they embark in the balloon he begins acting strangely. His eyes glaze; he nods off at strange moments; he answers her questions with dreamy nonsense. And it all gets worse. By the time they reach the lair of the immortal he is completely wrecked, utterly incapable of functioning as the hero of the story. Thus the beloved one learns for the first time of her inamorato's addiction, and she is deeply distressed. She also realizes that the job of overcoming the immortal is entirely in her hands.

And now comes the climax, the surprise twist that saves everything!

What is required, I see—having had decades and decades of experience at making cockeyed plot elements fit together—is something that will lead our hero out of the state of mental debility that his kweesh withdrawal has induced, free the wizard from captivity, and bring the evil immortal to his knees, so that our hero, our heroine, and her father can wrest the water-conjuring spell from him and make their escape from his fortress in the Central Mountains. We also need to deal with that brother-sister angle, somehow. Will *Plot Genie* provide us with some magnificent gimmick that will cope with all these problems?

Well, let's see. We are supplied with the usual list of 180 possibilities, and all we have to do is spin the wheel—

No. That makes it too easy. What I think I'll do instead is look through the list and provide you with seven or eight lively possibilities. *You* pick the best one, the one that will wrap everything up in one great sweeping burst of narrative in-

genuity, okay? Here are some suggestions:

1. *Wherein it develops that a person is impersonating himself or herself.*

2. *In which the enemy places himself in a position to incur the enmity of forces aside from the hero and allies, and is therefore overwhelmed.*

3. *Wherein a victorious opponent proves to be a friend in disguise.*

4. *Wherein it develops that the enemy himself is merely a figment of the hero's imagination.*

5. *Wherein the captor proves to be in the employ of the hero's parent, who is testing his fortitude.*

6. *Wherein the violence of the avenger or enemy brings about a cataclysm which destroys him.*

7. *Wherein a vanquished loved one proves to be in reality—*

But that's enough. It should be but the work of a moment for you to choose the most appropriate of those plot twists, apply it to the previously determined situation the genie has concocted, and turn the resulting outline into a short story worthy of publication in this magazine. The one that I like is the first one, in which a character is impersonating himself, which seems like a nice van Vogtian bit of doubletalk. But I would not want to influence your choice. Go to it, friends. Write your stories and send them to: Sheila Williams, Editor, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 267 Broadway, Fourth Floor, New York, NY 10007.

Mark them "Plot Genie Contest Entry." Sheila will read each and every one and will respond with a personal letter of criticism, and the three best submissions she receives will be purchased at our standard rate of payment and prominently featured in the magazine. I guarantee it.

Oh, and don't forget to include return postage.\* ○

\*If there are any literalists among you, let me hasten to add that Mr. Silverberg is surely joking—especially about that three page letter! Most of you will have figured this out because you already know that I now prefer electronic submissions. For more information about submitting online see [www.asimovs.com/info/guidelines.shtml](http://www.asimovs.com/info/guidelines.shtml).—Ed.

## NEW BRAINS FOR OLD

*remembering*

When I began writing this column, what I *thought* I was about was finding websites that readers of *Asimov's* might like to check out. But as time passed it became clear that the net was not only a vast digital library, but also a toolset for remaking culture. E-books and webzines and podcasts and blogs and Facebook and Creative Commons and free content have changed the way you and I relate to one another, to this magazine, to science fiction, and, yes, to society in general. So while the emphasis has remained on poking around cyberspace, from time to time we have stepped back to look at trends and technologies that affect everybody.

In the last installment, you may recall, we considered the proposition that the net is not only changing what we do, but is changing who we are. Nicolas Carr, in a book called *The Shallows: What The Internet is Doing to Our Brains* <[the-shallowsbook.com](http://the-shallowsbook.com)> and a website called **Rough Type** <[roughtype.com](http://roughtype.com)>, asserts that, largely unbeknownst to us, the internet is reprogramming our brains and thus privileging certain cognitive abilities over others. While some of his claims are more persuasive than others, his central thesis makes sense not only of social trends but also of some interesting scientific research. If nothing else, Carr's arguments will tickle your science fiction sensibilities. For over a century now, we SF writers have been thinking hard about what a **Posthuman** <[io9.com/5530409/](http://io9.com/5530409/)> might look like.

Perhaps all we need do is peer deep into our flatscreens.

*brainy*

In order to understand the implications of what Carr is saying, let's divide his argument into three parts and consider each separately. First: is the net really reprogramming our brains? Second: if so, then what exactly is changing? Third: are these changes good or bad?

It may come as a surprise to some readers that our brains can be reprogrammed at all. Until the 1970s, orthodox neuroscience held that the structure of the adult brain was fixed and the only change possible was degenerative. As we aged we would lose mental capacity; the best we could hope for would be to slow the inevitable erosion. This view has been largely discredited. We now know that the brain remains plastic; it can be profoundly remade throughout life. And according to the theory of neuroplasticity, what we experience can change the very structure and functioning of our brains. Connections within our brains are continually being pruned and created. Links can come and go in as little as a week. You will remember during the early days of the world wide web that those annoying **Under Construction Icons** <[textfiles.com/underconstruction](http://textfiles.com/underconstruction)> were everywhere? So it is with your cerebral cortex, which is similarly in a state of perpetual overhaul.

A key insight of neuroplasticity theory is that our brains are structured and restructured by our experiences. "It's what you pay attention to. It's what's rewarding to you," according to **Michael Merzenich** <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael\\_Merzenich](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Merzenich)>, one of the leading researchers in brain plasticity. In a 2004 TED talk <[ted.com/talks/lang/eng/](http://ted.com/talks/lang/eng/)

*michael\_merzenich\_on\_the\_elastic\_brain.html*>, he goes on to say, "It's all about cortical processing and forebrain specialization. And that underlies your specialization. That is why you, in your many skills and abilities, are a unique specialist. A specialist who is vastly different in your physical brain, in detail, from the brain of an individual a hundred years ago, enormously different in the details from the brain of an average individual a thousand years ago."

*We interrupt this column for a brief rant. Why doesn't everyone know about the non-profit TED <ted.com>, the best source of science popularization anywhere? Americans have a huge stake in knowing how the world works and yet our understanding of basic science is abysmal. In a 2009 California Academy of Sciences poll <calacademy.org/newsroom/releases/2009/scientific\_literacy.php>, only 53 percent of adults knew how long it takes for the Earth to revolve around the Sun, only 59 percent knew that the earliest humans and dinosaurs did not live at the same time and only 47 percent could roughly approximate the percent of the Earth's surface that is covered with water. Help! Do the world a favor and turn someone on to TED today.*

*We now return to your regularly scheduled column.*

In 2008, neuroscientist Gary Small <drgarysmall.com> released the findings of a study <newsroom.ucla.edu/portal/ucla/ucla-study-finds-that-searching-64348.aspx> he had conducted at UCLA. His team worked with seniors ranging from fifty-five to seventy-six, half of whom were seasoned net users and half of whom had no net experience. He found that the experienced netizens "registered a twofold increase in brain activation when compared with those with little Internet experience. The tiniest measurable unit of brain activity registered by the fMRI is called a voxel. Scientists discovered that during Internet searching, those with prior experience sparked

21,782 voxels, compared with only 8,646 voxels for those with less experience." Six days later, Small brought both groups back to repeat the experiment. In the interim he'd had the net novices practice googling around the net for an hour a day. The results? The newbies' brains now showed increased activity in the same neural circuits as the netizens'. They had effectively rewired their brains.

In five days. Clicking around the net for just one hour a day.

Going back to a point he made in his TED talk, Michael Merzenich posted the following to his blog **On The Brain** <merzenich.positscience.com/?p=177>, "When culture drives changes in the ways that we engage our brains, it creates DIFFERENT brains." Speaking of Google and the net, he goes on to write, "THEIR HEAVY USE HAS NEUROLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES. No one yet knows exactly what those consequences are."

Note: Dr. Merzenich isn't usually quite so heavy handed with the CAPS LOCK key.

*who reads Tolstoy?*

So what exactly is the net doing to your brain? The prefrontal regions of increased activity in the Small experiment are centers of problem-solving and decision-making. A 2009 New Zealand study <unitec.ac.nz/?1A61532B-FED5-4C57-85C3-60163A08462F> reported that people playing the first person shooter computer game **Counter Strike** <store.steampowered.com/app/10> for eight hours a week increased their ability to multitask up to two and a half times. Patricia Greenwell, a developmental psychologist at UCLA, cites the New Zealand study in her review of the literature published in **Science** <tvturnoff.org/images/fbfiles/images/greenfield%20science%202009.pdf>. Researchers have indeed discovered a "new profile of cognitive skills"—including increases in non-verbal IQ and facility at multitasking—among heavy users of "the informal learning environments of television, video games, and the Internet." But she points to other studies

that document the tradeoffs of the ongoing reorganization of our brains. "Although the visual capabilities of television, video games, and the Internet may develop impressive visual intelligence, the cost seems to be deep processing: mindful knowledge acquisition, inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination, and reflection."

Which is apparently what sent Nicolas Carr to his keyboard to write *The Shallows*. Understand that Carr is no Luddite; he concedes the many wonderful uses of the net. He is himself a blogger and a social networker and logs many hours in front of a screen. When he first began to notice that it was difficult to pay attention for more than a few minutes, he wrote it off to "middle-age mind rot." But now he attributes the greater part of his lack of concentration, his tendency to skip and skim and most important, his struggle to read and comprehend entire books, to what the internet is doing to his brain. The internet is transforming us into multitaskers and "heavy media multitaskers performed worse on a test of task-switching ability, likely due to reduced ability to filter out interference from the irrelevant task set" according to a **2009 Stanford University Study** <[pnas.org/content/early/2009/08/21/0903620106.full.pdf](http://pnas.org/content/early/2009/08/21/0903620106.full.pdf)>.

**Clifford Nass** <[stanford.edu/~nass](http://stanford.edu/~nass)>, lead researcher on the study, put it in layman's terms in an **NPR interview** <[npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112334449&ft=1&f=5](http://npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112334449&ft=1&f=5)>. "It's very frightening to us, and I think the reason it's so frightening is we actually didn't study people while they were multitasking. We studied people who were chronic multitaskers, and even when we did not ask them to do anything close to the level of multitasking they were doing, their cognitive processes were impaired. So basically, they are worse at most of the kinds of thinking not only required for multitasking but what we generally think of as involving deep thought."

So what? says Clay Shirky. You may recall Shirky from the previous installment; he wrote the book *Cognitive Sur-*

*plus*, which makes the case that the change that the net is effecting throughout society is mostly benign—and besides, it's inevitable. Too bad if deep reading has become a lost skill. Get used to the idea that the age of the book is passing. "No one reads *War and Peace*," he writes in an **Encyclopedia Britannica blog post** <[britannica.com/blogs/2008/07/why-abundance-is-good-a-reply-to-nick-carr](http://britannica.com/blogs/2008/07/why-abundance-is-good-a-reply-to-nick-carr)>. "It's too long, and not so interesting." Yes, he's being polemical, but the science suggests that he is half right. It doesn't matter whether Tolstoy's books are interesting or not; their real problem is that they are *long* and that they are *books*.

If books that are "too long" are passé, then we must consign some of our cherished classics to the dustbin of history. The one volume *Lord of the Rings* runs 1216 pages. The Fortieth Anniversary edition of *Dune* is 544 pages. And then there are the works of some of my most talented contemporaries—I'm looking at you, **George R.R. Martin** <[georgerrmartin.com](http://georgerrmartin.com)> and **Connie Willis** <[sftv.org/cw](http://sftv.org/cw)> and **Kim Stanley Robinson** <[sfsite.com/lists/ksr.htm](http://sfsite.com/lists/ksr.htm)> and **Susanna Clarke** <[jonathanstrange.com](http://jonathanstrange.com)>.

*exit*

Excuse me, I got distracted thinking about *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*. I remember feeling a sense of loss as I read the last page, mourning that my long and lovely encounter with English magic was over. Great book. And so very interesting!

So, what the hell were we talking about. . . ? Was it brains? Something that was supposed to be either good or bad, right? I don't know why I find it so hard to concentrate these days.

The fact is, we don't know whether our new brains will be better than the old ones. What we do know is that they are constantly adapting to the cognitive environment we live in. Maybe it's time to take charge of that environment?

Otherwise it's definitely going to mess with our heads. ○

# CLEAN

John Kessel

Two-time Nebula-award-winning-author Kessel co-edited the anthologies *Feeling Very Strange*, *Rewired*, and *The Secret History of Science Fiction* with James Patrick Kelly. John's most recent short story collection, *The Baum Plan for Financial Independence and Other Stories*, was published by Small Beer Press in 2008. About "Clean" the author says, "This story is a sequel to the first story I ever sold to *Asimov's*, 'Hearts Do Not in Eyes Shine,' which appeared in the October 1983 issue. In some ways this tale represents my attempt to imagine what an episode of a TV series based on that original story's premise would look like."

Her father taught electrical engineering at the university and had a passion for vacuum tubes. When she was eight, he taught her how to repair old radios. They would sit on high stools in his basement workroom and inspect the blackened interiors of battered old Philcos and Stromburg-Carlsons.

"Lee De Forest held the patent on the regenerative circuit," her father told her, "but that was an act of piracy. It was actually invented by Edwin Armstrong. Tell me what kind of tube this is."

"It's a triode," she would say.

"Smart girl." Her father took apart the wiring and made her, with a soldering gun, put it back together. Back then his hair was dark, and had not receded. She liked the way the skin at the corners of his eyes wrinkled when he squinted at some wiring diagram.

"This is hard work," he said after a while. "How about a poem?"

Her father had memorized scores of odd poems and obsolete songs. She blew on the bead of solder at the end of the wire. The pungent, hot smell got up her nose. "Okay."

"Here's one of my favorites," her father said. "*The Cremation of Sam McGee*."

"There are strange things done in the midnight sun  
By the men who moil for gold.  
The arctic trails—"

"Moil?" she said, laughing. "What does that mean?"

"You don't know what moil means? What are they teaching you in that school?"  
"Arithmetic."

"Moil means 'to toil, to work very hard.' Like we're doing right now."

"So why don't they just say 'toil'? It sounds the same."

"It's poetry, dear. It doesn't have to make sense. Hand me that spool of solder."

She couldn't remember how many weekend afternoons they spent down there in his workshop. Many. Not enough. She would never forget them.

On the mantel over the fireplace that they only used during Christmas sat a framed photograph. It showed Jinny's mother and father and a little red-haired girl who was Jinny, standing on a beach, squinting into the sun. Her father had one arm around her mother, and his other hand resting on Jinny's head.

Jinny hated going home for the holidays. Christmas was difficult; they had never been a religious family, and the celebrations seemed to involve increasing amounts of gin and vermouth. Her mother had checked out of the marriage emotionally years ago and her father spent hours in his workshop, but with Jinny there they felt obliged to spend time in the same room, and each of them bounced comments meant for the other off Jinny. As much as Jinny enjoyed seeing her dad again, she did not enjoy being the backboard for their loveless marriage.

She was in her third year of the PhD program in Sociolinguistics at Harvard. The night before she had gone out with some old friends to a club in Santa Monica, and she awoke with a head muzzy from a scotch hangover. She went down to the kitchen to find her father at the breakfast table in his bathrobe, staring at a cup of coffee.

He looked up at her with a dazed expression on his face. "Who are you?" he asked.

Always a joke with her father. "I'm the Ghost of Christmas Past," she said.

Her father's face worked with strong emotion. Jinny got worried. Her mother came into the kitchen then. "Dan, what's the matter?"

Jinny's father turned to her mother, looking even more puzzled. "Who are you? What is this place?"

"This is our home. I'm your wife, Elizabeth."

"Elizabeth? You're so old! What happened to you?"

"I got old, Dan. We both got old. It took a while, but it happened."

Jinny hated the bitterness in her mother's voice. "Mom, can't you see something's wrong?"

Dan raised a hand to point at Jinny. "Who's that?"

"That's your daughter, Jinny," Elizabeth said.

"My daughter? I don't have a daughter."

They calmed him, made him lie down, and called the doctor. The doctor said they should bring him to the hospital for some tests. They took him to the emergency room. By the time they had arrived he seemed normal, recognized them both, and was complaining that he wanted his breakfast. The doctor had called ahead and they admitted Dan to a private room, gave him a sedative, and he went to sleep. Once they had gotten him settled, Jinny turned on Elizabeth.

"What's going on?" Jinny asked her mother. "This doctor expected you to call. This isn't the first time, is it?"

"Your father has Alzheimer's. You talk to him on the phone. You haven't noticed him forgetting things?"

Jinny had. But she had chalked it up to normal aging. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You're the one who is supposed to be so close to him. I just live with him. I'm going to the ladies' room." She turned away and walked down the hall.

Jinny sat by the bedside watching her father sleep. His gnarled hands lay on the blanket. A burn scar ran across the back of his right. His eyelids fluttered and he took an occasional restless breath; he was dreaming. She wondered of what. She remembered how as a girl she had had a recurring nightmare about some witch living in the basement, so that whenever he asked her to go downstairs to fetch something from his workbench she turned on the stairway light and rushed down and up as



fast as she could, not looking into the dark corners. She'd grab the shop manual or screwdriver he'd requested and dash up the stairs two at a time. She put her hand out and brushed his thinning hair behind his ear. He needed a haircut.

She tried to understand why her mother was so cold. After a while she heard her voice in the corridor, talking to someone. She moved toward the door and listened.

"You can bring him in anytime after he's released," a woman's voice said. Jinny peeked out of the gap in the door and saw a woman in a nurse's smock, maybe in her thirties, attractive in a mousy way.

"I'm not sure he'll want to go through with it," Elizabeth said.

"Have him talk with Phoebe Meredith," the woman said. "Phoebe will draw him out."

Jinny pushed the door open. "Hello," she said.

The woman smiled nervously, "Hello. You must be Jinny."

"Who are you?"

Elizabeth started to protest, but the woman placed a hand on her arm. "I'm Connie Gray. I work in the trauma center,"

"This isn't the trauma center."

The woman seemed determined not to take offense. "Just talking to your mother. We met before."

"Jinny, please be civil," Elizabeth said.

"It's okay," Connie said. "This is hard on everyone."

"Is that Jinny?" Her father called sleepily from inside the room. His voice made Jinny's heart leap. She went back into the room, closing the door on her mother and the nurse. Her father was trying to prop himself up; she helped him get the pillow situated. His belly protruded under the blanket; she had not realized how much weight he had gained in recent years. "Sit down," he said, breathing heavily. "We've got a problem to face."

She sat in the chair beside the bed. "How do you feel?"

"Like they hit me with a sledgehammer. I didn't need the drug."

Jinny didn't tell him how upset and irrational he had been. She studied his face. He looked tired, but still her father. His smile was grim.

"Did your mother tell you about the plan?"

"What plan?"

He looked away. "There's a treatment that might help me. They say, if it works, that it can arrest the Alzheimer's and prevent dementia."

"That would be wonderful."

"There's a cost."

"We can afford it. Mom and I will find a way."

He rubbed his stubby cheeks with his thumb and fingers, then slid them down his throat. "Not that cost. In order to not end up forgetting everything, I would have to forget a lot."

"I don't understand. Isn't loss of memory the problem?"

"It's the problem and the solution. It's just a matter of how much, and I don't know how much. They can't tell me, they say. But the more I give up, the better my chances."

Jinny wondered if she should call the doctor. He wasn't making much sense.

"I don't want to be useless," he said. "To be a burden on your mother, and you. I won't have that."

"You wouldn't be a burden."

"And I won't be. I won't be, Jinny. That's the point."

Elizabeth drove them home from the hospital, Dan fidgeting in the passenger's seat.

"Calm down, Dan," she said.



"I should drive,"

"You don't have to drive all the time."

"I can still drive," he said.

Elizabeth looked at him out of the corner of her eye. If only he would say what he felt. Did he even realize how he was withholding it? "I know, Dan," she said. "You can still drive."

Jinny was following them in the other car. When they got home Dan insisted he was fine and went down to his workroom. Jinny went down with him. Elizabeth sat in an armchair in the living room to read one of the briefs she had brought back from her office.

Her eyes kept slipping over the words. She had a silly kid's song in her mind. *I went to the animal fair, the birds and the beasts were there. . . .* Dan had sung that song to Jinny when she was a child. He'd had a head full of such songs. Long before Jinny had been born he had sung them to Elizabeth in bed, after sex. The sex had been good at the beginning, and Dan's childlike remoteness, those moments when he seemed to drop out of the human universe into some near-autistic world of abstract thought, had not bothered Elizabeth then.

He had never been warm or demonstrative. He was at his best with ideas and objects. She might have been put off if not for his vulnerability and her understanding that he did not choose the way he was. And there were those songs.

At the university, he was never beloved by students. He had strict rules and he stuck to them. With his colleagues he was just as bad, and had never advanced within the department. Elizabeth ran interference between Dan and the social world he negotiated so poorly. The animal fair.

She gave up on the pile of papers—a sheaf of uncontested divorces, pure boilerplate—and listened for sounds from the basement.

Elizabeth wished that Jinny had not been home to witness Dan's latest episode. She supposed she should have told Jinny about Dan's deterioration, but she had dreaded Jinny's reaction. Jinny assumed that Elizabeth was jealous of her closeness to Dan, but that was not true. Rather, Elizabeth resented the fact that Jinny saw only Dan's good side whereas she had to deal with his depressions, his temper, his increasing distance. For Jinny he had infinite amounts of time and attention. For her he had nothing.

After a half hour Jinny came back upstairs and paced around the room like a nervous cat. She had grown more angular since she had gone away, and Elizabeth wondered how her life was going. Like her father, she seldom confided in Elizabeth.

Finally, Elizabeth spoke. "For pity's sake, Jinny, please stop pacing."

Jinny abruptly sat down on the sofa and waited until Elizabeth looked her in the eye. "New Life Choices, mom? It sounds like some online dating service. How did you even hear about them?"

"That nurse, Connie Gray."

"Dad told me what you're planning."

"I'm not planning anything."

"How could you consider having him erase his memory? Do you want him to forget you were ever married? That he ever had a daughter?"

"You saw him this morning. Did he know he had a daughter then?"

"But that's an illness. This is deliberate! You want to take away his life?"

"His life is coming apart. You don't have to live with it. You call on the phone every couple of months, come flying here like a princess once a year, and you think you know him? I know him. I've known him for thirty-five years. I sleep in the same bed with him. I cook his meals. I take care of him when he's sick. I wash his clothes. I make sure his socks match."

"That was your *choice*, you—"

Elizabeth felt tears coming to her eyes. "I watch him across the dinner table and I can see that he's not exactly sure what I just said. I go to find him when he calls because he's forgotten the way home. When he forgets the first time we met."

"Mother—"

"It's too hard, Jinny. I'd rather see him lose it all in one clean sweep than lose it bit by bit."

She seemed to have gotten Jinny's attention. "I don't want him to forget me," Jinny said.

"He's going to, regardless. There's nothing anyone can do about it. What did he tell you?"

"He said—he said what you're saying. That he'd rather forget everything all at once."

"And the erasure people say that if his memory is cleaned far back enough, he won't suffer from dementia. He won't feel afraid, or lost, or paranoid. Do you want to see him raving, strapped to a bed, or medicated just to keep him from hurting himself? And he's going to need caretakers. I can't do it alone."

"If he gets erased, you won't have to do it at all! You'll just move on. Like you've wanted to do for ten years."

Elizabeth looked at her daughter. She could recall looking into the mirror thirty years ago and seeing in her own reflection that same certitude. "You may think that I don't care about him anymore, but you don't have the right to say that."

"You made a promise. You're supposed to catch him if he falls. You're his wife."

"And who will catch me? Are you going to catch me, Jinny? Your father won't. I'll be alone. I've been alone for fifteen years."

Jinny launched herself from the sofa, her voice rising. "My god, *you* thought this up. You want to get rid of him. This is going to happen, and I won't be able to stop you."

"That's not fair."

Jinny turned and stomped out of the room.

Elizabeth listened to the sound of her steps climbing the stairs to her old room. From the basement she heard nothing. She wondered if Dan had heard any of this, and if he did, why wasn't he there to explain, to take responsibility for his own actions?

Why wasn't he there to tell *Elizabeth* what he thought about erasing her from his memory?

There was no such thing as a soul. There were only the brain and its structures: the cerebrum, the cerebellum, the limbic system, the brain stem. And the sub structures: the frontal, parietal, occipital, and temporal lobes. The thalamus, hypothalamus, amygdala, and hippocampus. That was all: the soul was a bunch of neurons firing. Or not firing.

Reuben read souls for a living. He knew where love hid in the brain. Lust, fear, confusion, faith, embarrassment, guilt. He saw them on his screen. He mapped them, in preparation of wiping them out.

But today Reuben was having trouble concentrating. Last night he had failed to ask Maria Sousa Gonsalves to marry him.

He glanced at the monitor showing the interview room where Phoebe was talking to the prospective client, an older man with thinning red hair. The guy—the tag on the screen read "Daniel McClendon"—was, according to the file, sixty-one years old. The pressure and temperature sensors of the chair in which he sat revealed a calm man, not anxious the way most of their clients were. The physiognomic software reading his face also raised no red flags.

Last night Reuben had meant to ask her at the restaurant, but in the presence of

the other diners he lost his nerve. What if she said no? But when they went back to her apartment and made love, Reuben realized he could never be with another woman. The glint of her brown eyes in the faint light. The smell of her sweat beneath the perfume. As vivid in his memory as if it had happened a second ago.

Reuben checked the brain scan. Normal activity in McClendon's audio and visual centers. Though Reuben had the volume on the speakers turned down, he could hear the man's voice as he answered Phoebe's questions. Phoebe was good at putting clients at ease. That was one of her gifts.

Phoebe handed McClendon the pad and said, "On the screen you are going to see a number of perception and recognition tests. For example, you might see a page of the letter 'O', and among them one letter 'C.' As soon as you spot the C among the O's, touch the indicator to move to the next image."

"I did these tests already, at the neurologist's," McLendon protested.

"I know," Phoebe said. "Just humor me on this."

As McLendon moved through the tests, Reuben noted his response. The man took a minute and a half to pick out the N in the field of M's. A normal response was ten seconds.

Phoebe thanked him and took the pad from his lap. "Okay then," she said. "Let me ask a few questions. What did you have for breakfast today?"

"A bowl of oatmeal. With bananas. Black coffee."

"Who is the president of the United States?"

"Please. Don't remind me."

"Do I need to remind you?"

Reuben noted his cerebral function. "No, you don't. Next question."

"What is Ohm's Law?"

"I'm not an idiot," McClendon said. A surge of activity in the amygdala. Anger, irritation—fear?

"Of course you aren't," Phoebe said. "You are a grown man, and an electrical engineer. Can you tell me Ohm's Law?"

"The current through a conductor between two points is directly proportional to . . . to the proportional . . . to the *potential* difference . . . to the *voltage* across the two points . . . and inversely proportional to the resistance between them."

Phoebe looked at her notes. "Can you tell me about the time you won the Draper Prize?"

McClendon answered. Reuben's mind drifted. He wished he could bring Maria in and put her under the scanner. He could ask her questions, watch the activity in her brain, and know for sure how she felt. Then he could take out the ring and give it to her and then she would say yes. They would marry and be together as long as they lived.

"Tell me about the first time you met your wife," Phoebe said.

"It was thirty years ago. I don't remember the details."

"Do you remember where it happened?"

"Her boyfriend—her boyfriend was another student in the EE program with me at Michigan State. We met at a party, or a restaurant, something like that."

"What did she look like?"

"She looked . . . she looked beautiful."

Phoebe continued through her inventory of questions. At the end, she asked, "Are there things that you don't want to forget?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Choice, Reuben thought. Choice was a function of the frontal lobe, the site of reason and analysis. Of course that was layered over activity all the way down to the lizard brain.

"Mr. McClendon, what you have erased, and the amount, is your choice. In order

to give yourself the best chance at recovery, you will have to make some tough decisions."

"I know."

Phoebe waited, letting silence stretch. Reuben observed the flare of firing neurons in McClendon's cortex. McClendon leaned forward, his hands clasped together, looking at the carpet instead of at Phoebe. "Ms. Meredith, I'm a man who could recite you the twelve major sections, with the subheads, of the *Electrical Engineering Handbook*. That's who I am. And now it's going."

"Yes. It's going."

"I don't like it. The more I'm willing to erase, the better my chance to beat the Alzheimer's?"

"That seems to be the case. This is a radical treatment. Treating Alzheimer's is not something we normally do."

McClendon sat silent.

"We can peel your memory back as far as you will accept. How do you feel about losing your memories of your wife, your daughter?"

The temporal lobe activity flared higher, and there was a spike—probably some sharp image brought to mind—in McClendon's visual memory.

"Jinny was a surprise," he said. "We didn't plan to have children." McClendon picked at the knee of his trousers. "I didn't want to be a father. But when she was born—" he paused. "She was like a little animal in the house. I was intrigued by her. I watched her change. I taught her things."

He looked up at her. "It was very interesting."

"What will you miss the most?"

In McClendon's mind: fireworks. Electrical impulses spilled across his brain. Broca's region, the temporal and occipital lobes, cerebrum, and deep down, in the hypothalamus, amygdala, hippocampus. Something big, something emotional.

McClendon leaned back in the chair. He said nothing.

Reuben recorded it all, but it was useless unless McClendon gave them some outside reference. McClendon crossed his legs, rubbed the palm of his hand back over the top of his skull, flattening his hair. It would help if Phoebe got some verbal correlative out of him.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"How can I say what I'll miss the most? How can you say what's the most important thing in your life? It's—it's really none of your business."

Reuben snorted. It was their business. He would be responsible for navigating precisely these minute regions when the time came to clean his memories. Locate the mysteries. Wipe them out.

Reuben didn't need any mysteries. In his pocket his hand played with the case containing the engagement ring. He knew what he wanted. He would ask her tonight. He would not hesitate, he would ask, and Maria would say yes, and they would be together.

Dan McClendon was willing to take an aggressive stance. Phoebe needed that.

Most of the people who came to New Life Choices were looking to get rid of some specific memory and go on with their lives. Some of them were frivolous. McClendon was different. He didn't need to forget anything for emotional reasons—he was dealing with a physiological condition. Alzheimer's was going to empty his mind like a jug with a dozen leaks, and in the process break him. He was here to empty himself prematurely, with the hope that it would leave him unbroken.

But the volume of memories he needed to clear in order to do that was without precedent. He would not, in some ways, be the same man. It was unknown territory.

In the beginning, Phoebe had considered cleaning to be a great boon to their clients. Deeply scarred individuals walked out of the clinic with a new ability to face the world, no longer with some debilitating cloud hovering over their heads. But years of observing people—and helping them—use cleaning for trivial purposes had increased her doubts. What kind of world would exist when everyone, instead of dealing with their problems, simply had them expunged? Her boss Derek seemed blissfully unaware of any drawbacks; he wanted her to take on more clients, but Phoebe was determined not to make cleaning become cosmetic brain surgery for people who got dumped by their girlfriends.

She needed to get a look at the scans Reuben had made during the screening. McClendon had not been forthcoming about his emotional investment in various elements of his past. Phoebe needed to know where the power memories lay.

She was packing up her briefcase when a young woman pushed into the office. She had flaming red hair and a distraught expression on her face. "Yes?" Phoebe asked.

"I'm Jinny McClendon."

"Come in. Sit down."

Jinny sat in the chair opposite her desk.

"How may I help you?"

"Right. I'll get to the point. I want you not to erase my father. I don't think you understand the situation. My mother is behind this. She's wanted to leave Dad for years, but she couldn't without feeling like the villain. This way she gets him to forget her, stashes him in some institution, and walks away with a clean conscience. And the house, and his investments, and everything else."

Jinny McClendon's face was pale, eyes red. Phoebe tried to assess how seriously to take this.

She could understand Jinny's reaction—she had seen variations on it dozens of times before—but that did not make it the best one for either her father or herself. If she talked to her father, he might just change his mind and call off the procedure. For the sake of his daughter's feelings he might sacrifice himself.

"Your father won't be in an institution. I've spoken with both of your parents, independently and together. Your mother said that she doesn't want the house. She wants your father to still live there, so he can have some familiar things around him."

"Familiar things? How will he even remember them?"

"Many of them he won't. Understand, it's not easy for him. Cleaning gives him at least a chance of remaining a functioning human being. Maybe even better than just functioning."

"But he'll be alone, abandoned! Who will take care of him?" Jinny stood up. "I can't take this any more." She opened the office door, but Phoebe called her back. "Miss McClendon. Jinny."

She hesitated, came back, sat down.

"He must choose what he is going to clean from his memory," Phoebe said. "Yes, he will be alone, but he will have most of his rational capacities intact. He'll be able to make a new life."

"He has a life already!"

"You know him better than I. But in order to save himself, he will have to erase the events that he would find it most painful to forget. He's going to forget you, and your mother, and most of the other people he's come to know in the last thirty years."

"The only things he keeps are the things that don't matter?"

"Or the oldest. Alzheimer's patients often can vividly recall things that happened forty or fifty years earlier, but not remember what they had for breakfast." Phoebe took a deep breath. Sometimes the best way to deal with reactions like this was to come at them sideways. "Could it be, Jinny, that the reason your father's erasing you

bothers you so much is because of your own needs? That wouldn't be an unnatural thing—for a daughter to fear the loss of her father's affections so much that she forgot the cost to him if he didn't go through with this."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that maybe it's what you want that's in your mind, not what your father wants."

Jinny's face colored. Quietly, she said, "You're saying I'm being selfish?"

"That's not the best way to put it."

Jinny stood silent for a moment. "So I'm selfish. But what about you? Why are you so interested in doing this? I've heard Mom say that you're excited about the chance to use your erasing process to attack Alzheimer's. There's big money in this."

"I'm not interested in making money."

Jinny snorted. "But if it works, your boss will make a lot of money. And you'll be famous. All because you cleared away half of a man's life. Aren't you just a little bothered by that?"

"Of course I'm bothered. It's not something I'd do easily. I've worried about cleaning. I don't think it's a panacea. Far from it, in fact. Too many people treat it as one." "Because you advertise it that way."

"I don't write the ad copy. I deal with the clients. I get to know them, I worry about them, I understand their motives."

"What, you're some kind of goddess? You have no self-interest? You're getting paid!"

"Believe me, I could find other ways to make a living."

Jinny's eyes narrowed. "Your conscience is bothering you."

Phoebe didn't know what to say. She sat there.

"You *don't* think this is the right thing to do!" Jinny said. "You don't care about my father—you're trying to prove something."

Phoebe stood up. "I've got nothing to prove. You're the one who is putting her self-interest above her father's welfare."

"It's not about helping him, it's about helping you."

"Ms. McClendon, I think we've gotten as far as we are going to get. Your father signed the papers. Your mother has power of attorney. If you have issues, you need to take it up with them."

Jinny McClendon got up to leave. She stopped at the door and looked back at Phoebe. Phoebe tried not to shrink under her gaze. She was not sure if she succeeded.

*the assistant's hands were warm as she touched his forehead and throat peeled the paper off adhesive sensor pads stuck them on his temples brow base of his neck right and left connected them to heavy wires that tugged on his skin laid him down on the bed he didn't like lying on his back it left him stiff but the drug calmed him close your eyes she said breathe deeply think about a pleasant place a place you feel safe and secure the basement the workbench the old radios blow the dust away how many years had this one sat in a barn pigeon shit on the cabinet but when he hooked it up the dial still glowed green it took a while no sound instantly you had to let it warm up the tubes giving off heat glowing in the dusky interior wooden bench top covered with black scars from the soldering iron and a voice came out of the speakers*

*her hands on his chest in his hair touching his face you have freckles all over your shoulders she said and he laughed and covered her mouth with his pressed her down onto the motel bed is this a freckle he said touching her with his index finger and she shivered eyes closed eyelashes fluttering sunset light slanting through the Venetian blinds in bars showing the contour of her breasts and the rumpled sheets outside the sound of the surf and someone playing a radio*

*the doctor lifted his daughter's hand on the tips of his fingers and drew him closer and pointed to the newborn's pinky so tiny so perfect the fingernail so minuscule you needed a magnifying glass to see it but perfect nonetheless and he said see this finger Dad and Dan worried said yes what is it and the doctor said that's the finger she is going to have you wrapped around and later he would put his own finger into his baby daughter's hand small pink soft and the hand gripped his fingertip so hard that strength of instinct holding on the way we held onto life don't let go Dad Jinny said her voice quavering I won't he said she was wobbling down the street on the bike he was jogging alongside holding the seat don't let go she said and he let go and she sped off on her own away from him down the slope faster than he could run pedaling now and at the end of the street she stopped awkwardly gripping the handlebars and shouted back her face glowing with triumph I did it*

*on the third move his hand slipped and his left foot lost purchase and he fell not so far ten feet maybe but he missed the pad and came down wrong and the snap in his ankle the sound more than the pain told him this would be it for rock climbing and in some way he was relieved Dan are you all right Mickey his partner said everyone in the gym stopping and coming over looking up into their faces that pretty girl he always watched her when she climbed and it wasn't just the shape of her ass though that had something to do with it couldn't remember her name that was spring of '98 or was it '99 he couldn't remember smell of sweat in the air the throbbing pain now they helped him up awkwardly icepack and over the PA some song heavy fuzz bass and organ that reminded him of a sixties song he'd heard on his brother's transistor radio in the back of the pickup on the way to Green Lake*

*his brother's hands on the sides of the cargo deck what was his name he had two brothers and one of them started with an L or was it W how could he forget something like that but he didn't feel bad about it right now he felt calm it was okay they were going to take care of him it was easier to forget forget because trying to remember only made him anxious and now he wouldn't have to be anxious anymore and the person beside the bed holding his hand let it go*

Sly was scouting eBay to see what the latest bids were on his merchandise when he got the call.

"Hello," she said. "Is this Sylvester Wesley?"

"Who wants to know?"

"New Life Choices gave me this number," the woman said. She sounded tired. "You did some work for them concerning my husband, Daniel McClendon. You cleaned the house for us."

Sly remembered McClendon. The item he was checking bids on was one of McClendon's radios. That was more than a month ago. "Yes, I did. Did I miss something?"

"No, that's not it at all. Actually, I need you to—to bring some things back."

"Bring things back? That's not what I do, Mrs. McClendon."

"Nonetheless, I need you to bring them back."

Sly's job was making things disappear, and he was good at it. He was a contract employee at New Life, erasing files, destroying records, pulling government documents, and sweeping clients' homes of objects that would remind them of things they had paid large sums to have erased from their memories. It was a lucrative sideline, but not his day job. Normally, he was a software engineer.

When they had called him and told him his next assignment was Daniel McClendon, the name seemed vaguely familiar. Then, when they sent him the files, he realized that he had taken a computer engineering class from McClendon a decade before.



Professor McClendon had been the strangest prof Sly had ever seen. Middle aged, a little slow moving, he conveyed the sense that the math he was so good at was just an elaborate game. In the middle of an explanation he would recite limericks about DRAM, or tell a funny story about the real reason the cell phone was invented, or sing some silly song. He had little patience for the slow witted. He did complex calculations in his head, barely giving the students time to keep up.

Once a student had asked him to repeat an explanation, and he replied, "Look, I'm not going to repeat it. It's as simple as two plus two equals four."

"Can't you at least write it on the board?"

"Sure," McClendon said. He picked up his marker, turned to the white board and wrote:

$$2 + 2 = 4$$

Sly thought McClendon was a hoot. His attendance was not faithful, but he was good on the tests. As he listened to Mrs. McClendon's request, he realized it probably wasn't any treat to be married to him.

"They told me he would be an Alpha Package cleaning," Sly said. "That he'd wake up in the hospital and be told he had been in a car accident and suffered a concussion. That you wanted everything related to the family removed from the premises."

"Whoever told you that was wrong," she said. "He knows some things are missing, and he wants them back."

Sly was going to have trouble recovering everything. He was supposed to destroy it all, so it could not ever turn up again, but he had been supplementing his income by selling the more valuable items. "What things?"

"He wants his books. His Draper Prize trophy. The stuff from his workroom: his tools, his radios. His teaching notes."

"He's still teaching?" Reuben had told Sly that the guy was having more erased than anyone in his experience.

A bitter irony crept into her voice. "He can't remember my name, but he's back teaching at the university."

"I'll see what I can do." Sly had to get onto retrieving the radios right away. Those vacuum tubes, some of them eighty years old, were irreplaceable. The only source for them nowadays was when someone occasionally discovered a cache in some decaying Soviet warehouse.

A week later he showed up at the McClendon house with the back of his Jeep packed with junk. He'd gotten the tools and some of the old radios and the framed photos. He parked in the drive of the old craftsman bungalow and sat smoking a cigarette. Mrs. McClendon had told him to wait; she didn't live there anymore.

As he waited outside, the front door of the house opened and McClendon came out onto the porch. He looked a lot like the way he did back when Sly was in school, maybe a little heavier, less hair. He squinted at Sly, then waved him over. Sly got out of the jeep.

"Got my stuff?"

"Yes sir."

McClendon stared at him a little longer than was comfortable. "You're Sylvestre Wesley. ECE 530, Physical Electronics. You missed too many classes."

"Yes sir."

"And see—see what you ended up doing? Bring my things in."

While he was ferrying boxes, Mrs. McClendon drove up in her Beamer. She saw that he was already almost done. Her husband, sitting in a wicker chair on the



porch, was fiddling with an ancient 8-track tape player. He looked up, noticed her, and went back to the tape player.

Mrs. McClendon hesitated, standing by her car. There was a hurt expression on her face.

Sly didn't want to see them together. He interrupted McClendon. "Where do you want this one?"

McClendon put down the tape player. "Follow me." He took Sly into the house, down the steps to his workroom, and had him heft the unwieldy box full of coils and transformers onto the bench. McClendon sat on a stool and began unloading the items, slowly, examining each as he took it out. Sly went back upstairs.

Mrs. McClendon was in the living room looking over the only box of personal items that Sly had retrieved. "You needn't have bothered with these," she said. "He doesn't remember us at all. I don't know if what they did to him has changed him, or only wiped the fog off the glass so we can see clearly what's inside him. What's inside him is nothing."

Sly didn't need this. "He's had his memory wiped. You can't blame him."

"I can't?" Mrs. McClendon picked up a framed photograph from the box. It showed her husband and her and a little red-haired girl standing on a beach, squinting into the sun. Her husband had one arm around her, his other hand resting on the little girl's head.

"In that picture you look happy," Sly said awkwardly.

She put it on the mantle over the fireplace. "Let him try to figure out what it means." And she walked out.

After she left, he finished moving the things in. He hesitated, then went down to tell McClendon he was done. The professor was still hunched over the tubes and wires, old resistors and condensers looking like foil-wrapped candies, wirewound pots, rheostats, worn schematics telling how it all fit together so it might work again, on fragile paper turned brown around the edges. "I'm finished," Sly said.

"That's good," McClendon said softly.

Sly couldn't just leave. "You know I wasn't the best student, but I liked your class. I liked all those stories you would tell."

McClendon turned and looked at him. "Stories? I don't—I don't know any stories."

Three months in Cambridge had not helped Jinny to deal with the aftermath of her father's erasure. She had avoided calling home, had refused any attempts her mother made to contact her, erased her e-mails unread, refused the phone calls, wiped out any voicemails without listening to them. Then, in a casual conversation with her cousin Brittany, she heard that her father was back teaching at the university.

"What? How can that be?"

"Apparently he was able to keep all his intellectual abilities."

Jinny called her mother. "No, he doesn't remember," her mother told her. "He's as awkward as a grad student with Asperger's, can hardly carry on a conversation."

"But he can still do his work?"

"He made a bet that he could keep the electrical engineering and still beat the Alzheimer's," her mother said. "Looks like he won." She sounded remarkably philosophical about the whole thing, not the bitter woman she had been when they lived together. "But everything else is gone. He peeled his memory back to before you were born, to before he ever met me. He reminds me of what he was like when we first met. He acts like a young, poorly socialized man."

"I'm coming to see him."

The line was silent for a moment. "If you have to. But honey, I don't know if it's going to make you feel any better."

"I have to."

Jinny talked to her mother for an hour. Elizabeth tried to alert her about what to expect. Then Jinny booked a flight for that weekend; the plane touched down at four in the afternoon on Friday, and she rented a car and drove straight to the house.

She hesitated on the porch, considered knocking, and rang the doorbell. She heard sounds from inside, and through the glass in the door saw him come toward her. He opened the door wide and spoke to her through the screen door. "What do you want?"

Physically, he looked good. He had lost some weight. He was clean shaven, his hair brushed back from his high forehead. He had his shirtsleeves rolled up and a pair of needle-nosed pliers in his left hand.

"May I come in?"

"You're my daughter, are you?"

"Yes." Her voice caught in her throat. "You remember me?"

He opened the door and let her in. "They told me I had a wife and daughter. The woman comes around sometimes. I'm working. If you want to talk you have to come down with me."

They went downstairs. He had a big RCA cabinet radio half taken apart on the floor. The thing must date back to the 1940s; it was an elaborate set, with AM and shortwave reception and a built-in record player with a 78-rpm turntable. The cabinetry was beautiful, inlaid chevrons of dark and light wood. The turntable was dismounted, exposing the wiring.

She sat on a stool next to him, held a light so he could see as he worked his narrow hands into the interior of the cabinet. She could not think of much to say, overwhelmed by his physical presence, the smell of the solder in the hot, musty basement. His sinewy arms and intent, old man's face. He made no attempt to put her at ease.

She asked him questions about the radio set. When he realized that she could tell a capacitor from a resistor, he let her help him. She took off her sweater and got down on her knees to be closer.

"Why do you like these old radios?" she asked him. "It's hard to get parts. They can't even pick up FM, let alone satellite. Nothing but political rants and holy rollers."

He did not look at her, concentrating on the work. "They're simple," he said. "I can understand every piece of them. I can take them completely apart and put them completely back together again. A modern circuit, you can't see without a microscope. I know how that works, too, but I can't put my hands on it. If it breaks, you can't fix it—you just throw it away. This light isn't getting in there. We have to turn this cabinet around. Help me."

He started to get up. His legs failed him, and he had to make a second attempt before he got to his feet. "I'm old," he said. "I keep forgetting."

Together they wrestled the bulky radio around so that the bench light was more useful. Her father exhaled sharply and drew his forearm across his forehead. "Do you want a Coke?"

"Sure."

He got two old-fashioned glass bottles from the basement refrigerator and popped the caps, handed one to her. Jinny took a drink. She watched him lean down into the cabinet again, squinting.

"Would you like to hear a poem?" she asked.

"A—a poem?" Her father lifted his head and looked at her, eyebrows arched.

"It starts like this: 'There are strange things done in the midnight sun, by the men who moil for gold—'"

"Moil? What does that mean?" he asked. He looked so trusting, like a child of eight.

Jinny moved in closer so she could see into the cabinet. "It means to work hard. Like we're doing now." ○

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# WHERE

Neal Barrett, Jr.

Neal Barrett, Jr., tells us, "My story in this issue is especially important to me. A lot of readers have mentioned that I'm kind of different. If they do, with 'Where,' I feel I made their day, as I have always felt strongly about the readers' part in the story. I want them to feel that I wanted them to have their part. It is no secret I don't ever explain. I couldn't, as I honestly don't know the secret myself. When readers seemed to love 'Stairs,' 'A Day at the Fair,' or 'Highbrow,' the part that's *not there* is what they like. That's their story, too. They're in the dream the same as I am. What you see there is yours. And that's the way I want it to be. Where are the stairs? readers asked. Where do you imagine they might be? In 'Where,' you will notice, no one in the story knows 'where.' But they are real, in their 'Where,' and, as I hope in all my stories, their lives are real to them. I'm not all that sure where I am, and neither are you. But it looks real from here, doesn't it?"

Tom and perry walked down to the mawl. jimmie skipped ahead, clack-clack-clack on his little lead feet. He was all excited, for he hadn't been there all day, or possibly any time at all.

"Don't fall," said perry, "I will not put up with that."

"We surely will not," said tom.

jimmie ignored them, and hopped on ahead. The day was cool, and the clouds scraped the rusty sky above. Sometimes, the sky came down, and the clouds smelled just like dust and went tickly in your head.

A shadow fell over jimmie, and a bhug crossed his path up ahead. It chirred, whirred, rattled and buzzed.

"Hello," said jimmie.

"Morning," said the bhug, and scuttered on away.

"Don't talk to that thing," said tom.

"It talked to me," jimmie said.

"If it eats you, don't look at me," said tom.

"Honestly," perry sighed.

The mawl appeared behind a row of skinny trees. It was hollowday, and very few dealers had set up their tents.

"I told you it wasn't worth coming," tom said. "Why, there's nothing here at all."

"Oh, come on," said perry, "there's always something at the mawl."

And, indeed there was, as jimmie could see the minute he saw the raggedy tent. "Look-look-look!" he cried. "What's it say, what's it say!" perry read:

## THE MUSUM OF TIM AND SPAYCE

perry looked at tom. Tom looked at perry. "It's two monies," tom said. "And we don't even know what it is."

"I don't care what it is," perry said. "I want to see it." He grabbed tom's hand and pulled him gently along. tom reached in his pocket and jingled the monies there. He'd intended to save them up for something else, but he certainly couldn't tell perry what.

Inside the tent, there was a row of glass panels with raggedy curtains inside. Something was behind each one, but you couldn't tell what even if you peeked, which is what jimmie tried.

"Stop it," said tom, who grabbed jimmie by the ear.

"Well, hello there," said a man, who suddenly appeared from nowhere at all. It was a tom, and looked just like the tom with jimmie, except he had a hat.

"Good morning to you all," said the tom, "welcome to the mawl. We've got a lot of wonderful things to see."

"Uh-huh," jimmie's tom stuck a hand in his pocket and jiggled it about. "Just what is it and how many monies will it be?"

"Just pay him," said perry, glaring at tom, "you're embarrassing us all."

tom looked around, to see who that might be.

The tom with the hat winked at perry, which tom didn't like at all.

"Come on," the tent tom said, "one monies, all right? And I won't even charge for the boy."

"Well I should think not," perry said.

The tom drew the curtains aside. Another perry stood behind the glass and gave them a happy grin.

"Welcome," said the new perry. "I feel privileged to present the most awesome, spectacular, UNbelievable sights you nice folks have ever seen."

"If it's a pencil, forget it," said visitor Tom, "I've got half a one at home."

"Which half," asked the perry, with sudden interest. "Mirado 2?"

"None of your business."

"If it's the top—"

"Get on with it," tent tom said. "These folks came for a show."

"Righto" said the perry, and, in a blink, in a flash, a pale blur of light filled the little room behind the glass.

"Oh, what is it?" cried perry, grabbing onto tom and holding tight. jimmie held his breath and pressed his face against the glass.

The mawl tom and perry seemed pleased.

"What you are seeing," said tent perry in a soft, mysterious breath, "is a peek into the very distant past. Through scientific methods and a great deal of luck, my partner and I have learned to capture tiny lumps of light invisible to the naked eye, and hold them a moment before they flit away again."

Even tom had to admit he'd never seen anything quite so awesome, so amazing in his life. Somehow, the scene "moved" from the left to the right, and though it was blurry and scratchy at times, you could often make out whatever was going on.

The scene was a room, that much was clear, but nothing like any room he'd ever imagined. A cloth with pretty colors was on the floor. There were things with four legs, some soft and some hard. Strangely enough, though he'd never even seen one before, he knew at once what they were: *they were things you could sit on. Things a lot higher than the floor. What an incredible idea!*

"Truly a wonder!" he said aloud. A thrill of discovery started at the base of his spine and tingled at the top of his head.

And before *that* thought could set his mind awhirl, there were other miracles to behold. On one wall was a big, bright picture with people *moving around* inside. There was a jar, filled with colorful globes. *Froot*, came the image at once. *Froot!* Melins, Helens, lemins, lymes, pears, claires, apuls and thymes. Some he'd seen in pictures, many he'd never seen at all. There were stacks and stacks of paper, paper on a shelf, paper on the floor, paper everywhere . . . a bright glass jar, all in one piece, shiny as the sea, with living flowers inside . . . a light on the ceiling, that glowed by itself. And, most wondrous of all, a dawwg, just like one in a book, squatting on its hind legs dropping dark blobs on the floor . . .

"Okay, *hold* that, cut it," shouted the tent tom, glaring at the perry inside.

The curtain swept shut and the scene went dark.

"Sorry about that folks," tent tom said, "things like that'll happen, you're working with your condominium and outerstella life."

"Well we got to see a dawwg," said jimmie.

"Just about all of *that* I'd ever care to see," said jimmie's perry, stalking off by himself.

"I guess we'll be moving along," said jimmie's tom. "Real—interesting place you got here."

"Come back again," said the other two.

jimmie hung back while tom and perry walked on. He knew it was a good idea to leave them be when one got on the wrong side of the other. peeples did that all the time, and if you were a khido, you knew not to be there when they did.

A perry had a little stand on the corner, and tom had given jimmie half a monies to spend any way he liked.

"Got mudberry cone and popweed," said the perry, who wore a small white cap. "Popweed's hot, just made it fresh."

The mudberry didn't look good, and never did, so jimmie got a sack of popweed, which was mostly his favorite of all.

"Don't run off with that sack," the perry told him. "Only one I got."

"I won't," said jimmie.

He chomped on the tasty seeds, and listened to them pop. My, they were good. Good and hot, just like the man said. He walked along the empty road, crunching and munching as fast as he could. There wasn't much to see, but there really never was. Still, it was fun to look. Something might happen when you were doing something else.

Then, of a sudden, one of the seeds went *pip!* instead of *pop!* and a bright silver nub flew out of his mouth and hit the ground . . .

Jimmie was scared to death. He dropped his sack and ran back the way he'd come. He went down on his knees, scraping dirt and weeds aside. The nub was gone, nowhere to be seen. It could be *anywhere*, but somehow he knew he'd never see it again. And when he got back they'd know. You couldn't guess *how* they would, but they'd know . . .

There were poles in the ground and pegs on the poles and wear of all sorts sagging here and sagging there. Wear for your arms and wear for your legs. Dickeys, doublets, knickers and bibs. Socks, jocks, pinafores and frocks. All were faded blue, pale, frail, washed-out, threadbare, fine as a spider's den.

"I kind of like that frock," perry said.

"What, which one's that?" tom said.

"Up there, on the right."

"You got one at home, just like it."

perry didn't answer. He tugged at tom's sleeve. "You thinking any more about the boy?"

tom looked at jimmie from the corner of his eye. The boy was just standing there, not saying anything at all. His yellow trousers were dirty and something was the matter with his mouth.

"What's wrong with his mouth?" tom asked.

"How would I know?" said perry.

"He's a pretty good boy," said tom.

"He is." "You think you want him again?"

perry thought about that. "We can always get him next time."

"We could do that," said tom.

tom looked at the sign at the bottom of the hill.

He didn't have to look at jimmie. jimmie could see the sign, too.

The sign on the shop read:

## K H I D S

The paint was faded and cracked but you could read it fine up close.

"Well," tom said, "here we are, jimmie. It was really nice being with you."

"We hope you had a good time," said perry.

jimmie kicked at the ground. He didn't look up. "I liked the musum."

"Yes, that was fine," said tom.

"It surely was," said perry.

"Well then," said tom. He smiled, and looked at perry, and perry smiled too. They both looked at jimmie, then turned and walked back up the hill.

Past the rocky slope they could see the river and the town nearby. The river was a dry and tortured path going this way and that. Peeple called it a river, since peeple always had. No one called the town anything at all. There were burrows, dens, boxes, coops and flats. Shanties, shacks, places made of slats.

tom paused as they reached the top of the hill. "What I'd really like right now is a sex. Seems to me a sex would be fine."

"Well don't look at me," said perry. "It doesn't seem *fine* to me at all."

tom knew, at once, pursuing this was not a good idea. As a fact, perry liked a good sex, but he surely didn't want one now. perry always let you know what he liked and what he didn't. tom watched him stalk off down the hill then turned back the way he'd come.

The hut didn't have any name. You knew what it was or you didn't. tom had only been once before, and didn't really want to go there again.

The man was a tom. He had red hair and no hat. "I would like to buy a sex," tom said. "How much will that be?"

"One sex is three monies," said the man.

This irked tom a lot. He'd been saving the monies for a hackit or a bihr, he hadn't decided which.

The man didn't have to ask. "Over here," he said, and hid a smile.

The wall was weathered wood. There were four words scribbled in chalk:

NOSE

Rocks

antz

MYCE

A discreet concavity was carved just below each word, so neatly done, one could scarcely find any offense at all.



"These represent the four known stars," said the man. "Myce, Nose—"

"I *know* what they are," said tom with some irritation. "You going to stand there or what?"

"No, sir. I'll be right outside."

"Good. You do that . . ."

Inside K H I D S, another jimmie was sitting in a corner, all by himself. "So where is everyone," jimmie asked. "Isn't anyone but you?"

"You and me," said the other jimmie. "big tom got us jobs. That's where everyone is." jimmie didn't want another job, and didn't ask.

"Those people okay?"

"People. Like everyone else. I got popweed. I lost a nub somewhere don't tell big about that."

"Won't have to. big'll know."

jimmie knew that was so. Without a word, he got up and walked out back. He didn't know why, but he did most every night. There was still a touch of day, and he could see the big pile of old jimmies against the fading light. The pile was so high he could scarcely see over it without tipping up on his toes.

There were arms, legs, elbows and knees, bent, broken, splintered and snapped, poking this way and that. Plastic bellies spilled tangled, strangled strings of wire. Blue eyes stared at him from a shiny chrome head. "I know him," jimmie said aloud. "I know him and everybody else here, too."

Most of the time the pile stayed the same. Sometimes, it got a little bigger, but it never got smaller. jimmie was certain of that, and it worried him some, because he knew jimmies never got fixed. If something got broken, it ended up here. If big tom heard about his nub, that's where he'd be, too.

Just then, big tom himself came through the back door. jimmie nearly jumped out of his shoes.

"Got a job. Come on. Get up. Get moving. Let's go."

jimmie followed, walking quickly as he could. It was hard to keep up with big tom.

He had never seen the little hut before. big tom left him there and another tom met him at the door.

"Can you crank?" the man wanted to know.

"Can I what?"

"Crank." The man made a gesture. "Crank. When you need to crank you crank. When you don't then you stop. Got it, boy? Don't stand there, come on."

The man led jimmie behind a wooden wall. There were three other jimmies lined up in a row. Each jimmie had a crank. The man stopped jimmie at the end.

"Him, that's NOSE. That's ROCKS, that's ANTZ. You're MYCE. There's not much business right now but things'll pick up. You'll know when to crank. You'll know when to stop."

He cranked, stopped, did as he was told, until the man closed up for the night.

perry was sleeping soundly when tom got home. tom knew the best thing to do was simply leave him alone. He found a scrap of blue, one of perry's suit, and wrapped up outside against the night.

It was funny how a sex would keep you awake. There was something about it that worried at your head. The last thing tom liked to do was worry at his head. All it did was get your mind stuck on something and that flat messed up the day.

tom had been with another perry once. All he did was think about this, think about that: He thought about nu-ju flying overhead, genderella and the dorf. tom had finally had to knock him in the head.



\* \* \*

The job at the hut took nearly all night, and big tom turned off jimmie and the others and let them sleep till noon. jimmie felt fine. He found another nub in the pile out back and screwed it in his mouth real good.

Later in the day, two things happened at once. jimmie could scarcely remember anything like that. First, a herd of bhugs rumbled by just over the hill. More bhugs than he'd ever seen before: lumbering beetles with great, snapping jaws, long, slithering centipedes with dark, brassy scales, mites, ticks, skinny bhugs that looked like sticks. The earth seemed to tremble, and the air was full of sounds like *chit-chit-bu-uuzzzzz-buuuuz whiiiiir*. jimmie saw a bhug with big red eyes, and when it looked at jimmie he saw maul tom in its scissory jaws.

Just before dark, all the jimmies, and a lot of peeples too, came out to watch the big truck grind up the hill. When it stopped, the bed slanted up and spilled dozens of brand new toms and perrys to the ground.

One began to whirl around and dance. One got hungry and tried to eat a rock. Most simply studied their naked parts and wondered what to do next. A few gave up at once, fell down and died.

jimmie wandered off, the smell of new people heavy in the air. Next week, he knew, or the week after that, another truck would come and dump shiny jimmies on the ground. And then, after that . . .

*After that, jimmie thought, after that, they'd do it all again.* A little spark sizzled in his head. He'd never, ever had a thought like that before: There were afters, but they didn't happen all the time. And if that was true—*there had to be before, where anything could happen in between!*

jimmie knew this was much too much to think about all at one time. He decided he'd walk back to K H I D S and take a nap, or see if any jimmies were around, then think on this new stuff a little later on. He glanced back up at the hills, and wondered if mawl perry had made it, or if the bhug had eaten him too . . . ○

## THE SPIRIT ROVER LONGS TO BASK IN SUNSHINE

Although one crippled wheel drags behind,  
we must outrace the sinking of the sun.

To survive the winter, for which we weren't designed,  
Spirit must drive to find a sunlit home.

The burned-out wheel turns soil like a plow,  
excavating sand, a drag upon our motion.  
We dig through sand to sulfate salt below,  
the buried trace of vanished ancient ocean.

We cannot pause to follow up:  
we move or die. We cannot stop.

To tilt its solar cells into the day's sun  
we need a hillside angled to the north.  
Spirit must drive to reach a winter haven,  
for winter comes, and days grow cold and short.

—Geoffrey A. Landis

# “I WAS NEARLY YOUR MOTHER”

Ian Creasey

Ian Creasey tells us that with the following story he has reached a milestone in two respects. “Firstly, it’s my tenth sale to *Asimov’s*; it’s very pleasing to reach double figures. Secondly, it’s my first appearance with a story that’s longer than ten thousand words. (You can tell I have a mathematics background from the fact that I notice these numerical quirks.) But although this is my longest story here to date, it’s actually much shorter than the tale I originally planned. Some time ago, I was working on a very ambitious novella, and getting utterly bogged down in its complications, so I decided to start again with a different approach. The following story is the result.” While his disconcerting new story is shorter, it doesn’t seem to have lost the complexity of the original novella.

**O**n Friday afternoon, coming home from school, Marian saw a woman leaning on the garden gate, smoking a cigarette and tapping her foot to the beat of the tiny earphones she wore. It was a fast song, by the look of it; or maybe she was just impatient. The woman looked familiar—far too reminiscent of Marian’s mother, triggering a painful wrench in the gut of the kind Marian thought she’d outgrown. Her mother had died four years ago, just after Marian’s eleventh birthday. For months afterward, Marian had been pummeled by echoes everywhere: she would see a purple-tinged hairstyle across the street, or hear the ring tone of her mother’s old cell phone, and for a heart-stopping moment she’d think Mom was alive, and then have to remember all over again that she was gone, gone, gone.

Resentfully, Marian glared at the stranger. She assumed the woman was a tourist—Hebden Bridge was crawling with them—but she didn’t have the rucksack or Ordnance Survey map or smug “I exercise outdoors and eat healthily” expression that most of the summer visitors had. Instead she had a tan that looked like it came out of a bottle labeled Burnt Umber, and she wore a loose blouse that was five years too young for her. If not a hiker, she was probably one of the New Age crowd looking for a house to rent, with plans to give lessons in tarotmancy and join whichever of the pagan circles had concocted the most impressive-sounding heritage.

Marian strode to the gate, expecting the woman to move out of the way. Instead the stranger tore off her earphones and said, “Oh, you’re early! I was going to have it all worked out what to say, and now—well, here you are. I’m so pleased to see you! You look great. I like what you’ve done with your hair. It’s not easy when you have

curls, is it? I remember—" Then she clapped a hand over her mouth. "I'm rambling! I'm so sorry. I took a little something to stop me being nervous, and now I can't shut up."

She fell silent, and stared with an intense proprietorial gaze that made Marian wonder whether she'd washed behind her ears properly.

"If you're here to see my grandparents, they've gone away for the weekend," Marian said firmly. She wanted to get rid of the unexpected visitor so that she could call her friends. It was practically the first time she'd had the run of the house for a couple of days. She'd promised not to hold a party, but all the way home she'd been counting how many people she could invite round, without crossing the line between "friends hanging out" and "having a really wild time with lots of hot-looking boys." Yet it wasn't about the numbers—it was about whether you had booze. Without alcohol, it wasn't technically a party, no matter how many people you crammed in.

"I'm here to see you. Don't you recognize me?" The woman spoke in a hurt tone, as if her identity should have been obvious.

Marian had somehow failed an exam that she hadn't even known was happening. It made her feel stupid. She hated feeling stupid. "No, I don't recognize you." And because she was feeling resentful and stupid—the weekend had only just started and already it was spoiled—she added something that her grandmother often said at outbreaks of self-importance. "The world doesn't revolve around you, remember."

"Now there's a nice way to talk to your mother!" said the stranger, indignantly.

"My mother's dead," Marian said, hating the woman for making her say it, for stirring up the coagulation of memories and grief that had clotted deep inside her.

"Yes, I know. But I was nearly your mother."

Marian dropped her schoolbag and stared at the stranger. "What are you talking about?"

"You must have heard about parallel universes, alternate selves and all that."

"Sure," said Marian. "Celebrity gossip!" The magazines were full of it—stars whose alternates were having different careers and different lovers, with different scandals and rehab stints. Marian and her friends pored over the gossip rags every week, and sent each other links to the latest sleazy stories on the web. Why, only the other day Lester Todd and his girlfriend supposedly had a foursome with their alternate selves, with the two Lesters competing to . . . well, it made her blush to read about it.

The woman laughed. "Everyone has alternates, you know. Not just celebrities. They were the first people who could afford to hop, but everything gets cheaper if you wait. I waited—and now here I am."

"So you're my mother's parallel self? No wonder you looked familiar!" Marian's voice cracked as she spoke. She didn't know how to feel about this, or how to deal with it. This wasn't Mom, and yet it was. Marian wanted to hug her, and at the same time she found it too creepy. She'd known intellectually that everyone had alternate selves, but it was a big leap from reading about celebrities on websites to having your own dead mother turn up at the garden gate.

"I diverged from her a long time ago—before you were born. I never had a child of my own." A depth of sadness suddenly opened up, a chill in the summer air.

Marian knew that a lot must lie behind those words. It was too much all at once. She wasn't ready for it. "I'm sorry," she said, for once blessing the reflex politeness that her grandparents tried to drill into her. Why had she never appreciated how useful those empty formulas could be? They gave you something to say, when you had nothing to say.

"So . . ." said the woman. She gestured indecisively. "I didn't want to barge in on another version of me. But accidents happen. I knew there must be a world where I had died."

A neighbor walked down the street, his greyhound snuffling among the dandelions. Marian didn't want anyone to overhear this conversation. She barely wanted to hear it herself. She swallowed hard. "Do you want to come in for a cuppa?"

"Sure!" The visitor's stiff posture relaxed a little. "Thanks, I'd like that."

The woman—Marian couldn't think of her as Mom, not yet, maybe not ever—followed Marian up the short path to the front door, between tubs of lavender that scented the air as they brushed past.

"Nice garden," her pseudo-mother said. "Is any of this your stuff?"

"No!" said Marian, laughing. "That's the old folks. They love it—they have an allotment as well, outside town. Some of it's for the shop. Mystic herbs, all that crap. I swear, any old weed takes root in here, they'll put it on sale as Sylvan Essence of the Arcane Realm. The sillier the label, the higher the price."

On Saturday afternoons, Marian sometimes helped fill orders and stack shelves in the shop, "The Cauldron by the Bridge." She despised the gullible fools who bought sacred herbs and plastic crystals and reproduction Tarot decks printed in China on recycled paper. None of it *worked*. It was all bogus solutions for bogus problems. In the clientele's earnest queries, she'd heard everything under the moon—disturbed auras, unbalanced destinies, reincarnation diagnostics for cats and pigs.

But if your dad was in prison and your mom was dead, then no stupid little fake potion would bring them back.

Marian put the kettle on. Grateful for an easy subject to start the conversation, she made fun of the customers with their oh-so-fascinating angelic encounters and spiritual conundrums. However, Marian refrained from mentioning something she might have told her real mother: that she occasionally switched the labels on similar-looking charms and crystals, just to see if anyone would ever complain of unexpected effects. Instead she concluded, "The herbs sell pretty well. And when people buy alternative medicine, we don't let them pay with alternative money!"

The woman laughed, and lit another cigarette from the stub of the old one. She looked comfortable, sitting by the kitchen table in her bare feet after shucking off her high heels. Marian wasn't comfortable at all. The situation spooked her.

"Look, no disrespect," said Marian, "but you're not my mother and I don't know what else to call you. It's freaking me out. Who are you? Why are you here? Have you come for one of my kidneys, or what?"

"If it helps, call me Della. Think of me as your mother's long-lost twin sister."

"Auntie Della? It sounds like an Internet advice column: *Ask Auntie Della about all your embarrassing personal problems*. Where's that name come from?"

"Oh, one of my boyfriends called me it. When we were introduced, he didn't catch my name properly, and he called me Della until we sorted it out. Later, it became his pet name for me. It's nice to have little shared jokes with people you're close to. I liked him a lot, and sometimes I thought of Della as my better self, the person I'd be if I had a normal life and settled down with a husband and kids and cats. . . ." She stared into the distance. "But it didn't work out."

"I'm sorry," Marian said again, wondering how much bitterness she would find herself listening to. "Can I have a ciggy?"

Della smiled. "Oooh, my first parenting dilemma!"

"Don't say that. You're not my mother."

"I'm more than half of your mother—we had the same life for nineteen years, before we diverged."

"Maybe so, but you're still not my mother."

"I'm the closest you're going to get."

Tension filled Marian's body, the muscles clenching in her thighs and shoulders. "If you diverged before I was born, there must be alternates of Mom who diverged a

lot more recently. Say . . . a version of her who didn't die in the accident, who didn't get in the car that day."

"Yeah," said Della. She flicked ash off her cigarette so forcefully that it missed the ashtray and landed on the table. "But all those other versions—where are they? I came to see you. I'm here for you. Doesn't that count for anything?"

"I guess." Marian suddenly felt guilty for being resentful and ungrateful. It was like all the times as a child when she'd found her mother embarrassing or overbearing, and she'd wanted her to disappear. Then Mom had died. She would have given anything to revoke those wishes, to see her mother come back. Now her mother was here—or the nearest approximation. Near enough to spit on, as her grandparents would say. They'd never liked Mom: they blamed her for leading their son into drugs and crime and prison.

"So, you're here for me," Marian said. "Thanks for coming. What now? What do you want to do?"

Della smiled, as if a light had been switched on inside her. She was like the Lester Todd song, "The Girl With A Neon Heart." "I'll do whatever I can. I'll help you with your homework, talk to you about boys, teach you how to wear make-up. I want to be your mother! I'll give you treats, buy you toys and dolls. We'll go on holiday together, visit museums and all that kind of stuff. We'll take photos and have a family album. I want you to be happy—I want to make you happy."

The words tumbled forth in an outpouring of need. Marian felt embarrassed at the naked emotion in Della's face, the sense of pent-up longings finally bursting out. It was all too much. Within her, a deep childish part of herself responded, wanting the long-lost mother who would play at dolls and bake cupcakes. But it was too late for that.

"I'm fifteen," she said. "I don't need toys and dolls. If that's the kind of thing you want, why didn't you hop to a different universe, one where your alternate died leaving a child three years old, or seven years old? Why here? Why me?"

Della slumped forward onto the table, her head in her arms. When she raised her face to look at Marian, her eyes were wet with tears.

"I didn't want to tell you this," she said. "But you're right—there is a reason I'm here. It's you I want, not some other child. . . ." She paused for a long moment. "God, this is hard. I need a drink! Is there anything in the house?"

This was all too familiar. Mom had been fond of drinking, and now Della looked to be the same. It made Della feel more like her real mother, and Marian suffered a pang at the sight of the tearful woman across the table, falling to pieces like a repackaged version of the same defective toy.

"No, there's nothing to drink," she lied. She touched Della's hand. "Come on, you can do this. Out with it."

Della drew in a rasping breath. "Well, it's simple really. Your mother was nineteen years old when she became pregnant with you. And so was I." She stopped, as if that were the whole story.

"But you said you never had any children." Marian frowned, trying to work it out.

"That's because I had an abortion."

"You . . . had an abortion?" The word felt strange in Marian's mouth. It was something from films and soaps and gossip mags, not a word to say over the kitchen table with a cup of tea. *That's me she's talking about. She was pregnant with me, and she aborted me.* "You've got a lot of cheek! Come back to finish the job, have you?"

"No! It's not like that. I wish it had never happened. I want to take it all back and start again." Della wiped her eyes. "God, I'm such a mess. I wanted to make a good impression on you, and here I am falling apart already. There's no hiding it, I suppose. I'm a wreck, a shriveled-up burnt-out wreck."

Marian sat still, waiting for the rest of it to come out. From her schoolbag, she heard

the beep of her cell phone as messages arrived. Her friends would be asking about the party—when they should come, what they should wear, who they should bring. That was her life, not this universe-hopping intruder now drama-queening in her kitchen. Marian had only just met Della, and already she despised her. She was weak, even weaker than Mom. She could want whatever she liked, but she wouldn't get it.

Della was talking, between hiccups and sobs. "I was a student, I had no money, I had nothing. . . . And he was useless; I knew even then he was no good, even before he went down. Pathetic jailbird prick! How could I have his baby, when we'd already broken up? Besides, I was only nineteen, I had plenty of time. I'd get a degree and a career and a husband and cats . . . oh, it was all in front of me!"

"But none of it happened. I didn't finish college, or get a proper job. I lived for the moment. I was the party girl with the good-time pills, the tabs to take you up and the weed to bring you down. Yeah, I sold the lubrication of festivation . . . only the class B's, nothing injectable. Nothing I wouldn't take myself.

"Well, the years drifted by. And when is the right time to have a kid? When you meet the right guy. I already told you about Narinder. He called me Della and I called him Mr. Happily-Ever-After.

"Except I'd picked up a dose in the party years. Chlamydia. You heard of that?"

Marian nodded warily.

"Good—watch out for it. You need to look after yourself better than I did. I never knew I had it, and by the time I found out, it was too late. It got into my womb, and I was infertile. I can't ever have kids.

"We thought about everything: surrogacy, IVF, adoption." Della put on a posh voice and continued, "Did you know, my dear, that Social Services don't take kindly to ex-addicts wanting to adopt? Seems they think we might relapse. Gosh, what a slander!"

Back in her normal down-market dialect, Della concluded, "So, no kids—and pretty soon, no Narinder." She shrugged. "The only time I'd ever been pregnant, I blew it. How could I know it would never happen again? I kept thinking about it, wondering if I'd done the wrong thing. Hindsight is what keeps you awake at night. Then I heard about the hopper, the parallel worlds, and . . . well, you know the rest."

Marian wanted to slap Della's face. The nerve of the woman! She was as selfish as those customers who came into the Cauldron wanting "love summonings," regardless of how their victims might feel about it.

"I'm amazed you've got the brass neck to turn up with a story like that," Marian said. "Never mind the neck—you must have a brass chest, a brass stomach, and a brass arse!"

"What do you mean?" said Della. "That's my life in black and white. It's no fun being childless, you know."

"Sounds like you had a lot of fun anyway, Miss Party Girl. And now you come along and tell me that you aborted me, which is bad enough, but I thought maybe you regretted it. I could understand that. But you don't really regret it, do you? You only wish it hadn't happened because of what followed. If you hadn't caught a dose and become infertile, you would never have regretted that abortion. You'd never have thought of it again. You certainly wouldn't have come barging into my house wanting to play at mommies and daughters." Marian unexpectedly felt a catch in her throat, and hated it for ruining the delivery of a perfectly good rant. "If you'd had kids of your own, you wouldn't be here now. So you don't really care about me at all."

Marian felt tears rising, and tried to choke them back. It was like losing her mother all over again. To see Della across the table, to hear her sounding like Mom and offering to give advice and buy treats and do all those parenty things . . . it had got her hopes up. Subconsciously, she'd thought her mother was back. But no, it was only some selfish bitch trying to use Marian as a bandage for her own emotional wounds.



"You don't care about me, so you can get lost." She leapt out of the chair, sending it clattering backward, and flung open the kitchen door. "Go on, get out!"

"Ah, the teenage tantrum," said Della. "I've only been here half an hour, and already we're having a row. How quickly the glamour of parenthood fades. But I shall be strong!" She got up and closed the door, then began looking inside all the kitchen cupboards.

"I know it's a shock," Della went on. "And yes, you're right—I wouldn't be here if my life had turned out differently. But then, neither would you. You wouldn't be here if your mother hadn't died. We are where we are, and we have to make the best of it. After all, when I found out I was infertile, I could have sat at home feeling sorry for myself. Well, I did! For months and months. But then I got up off my backside and I decided to look for someone who needed me. I want to make a difference. Won't you at least give me a chance?"

"You say you want to make a difference, but it looks like you really want to make a drink," said Marian sourly. "Sit down and stop rifling the kitchen! I told you there isn't any alcohol. If you want me to give you a chance, you need to look a bit more like a mother, and a bit less like a bag lady who's just wandered in off the street."

"Now then," Della said, "less of your sass. I'm not hunting for booze like some damn alkie whore. I'm looking for—ah-ha!" She grabbed a set of scales from a cupboard full of rolling pins and scone-molds and other baking paraphernalia. Then she took a Tupperware container out of her handbag. Inside the Tupperware lay a large plastic bag full of gray powder. She weighed the bag and scribbled the result on a scrap of paper.

"What's that?" asked Marian. She'd been to parties where older kids giggled and tried to look cool as they brought out their stashes of weed or coke or speed, but this looked nothing like any of them.

"This is a perfectly legal substance," said Della. "It's a precursor chemical to another substance that is also perfectly legal . . . in this world, anyway. In other universes, maybe the end product isn't quite so legal, although this little bag would still be perfectly legitimate—just very difficult to get hold of. But here, where certain drugs are less fashionable and the government hasn't needed to clamp down, it's just a matter of finding someone who'll do you a favor." She sighed. "It makes me feel old, knowing that guys I dated when we were students are now biochemistry professors with their own labs."

"And the specialness never ends," said Marian tartly. "I thought you came here to reunite with your long-lost aborted fetus, and it turns out I'm merely the afterthought to a drug deal." Again, she felt let down, though she knew she shouldn't. The words echoed in her head: *the world doesn't revolve around you.*

"Well, since you made such a point of telling me you were fifteen and too old for toys and dolls, I thought I'd treat you like a grown-up and tell you the score. How do you think I can afford to hop across universes? It isn't the million-quid-a-time celebrity hobby it started as, but it still ain't cheap."

"Fair enough, I suppose." Marian found that her feelings had executed a swift one-eighty—rather than being offended that Della had extra items on her To Do list alongside Long-Lost Baby, she felt somewhat relieved. It put less pressure on Marian, if Della had other concerns. Already Marian was wary of Della's neediness, her quasi-parental desire to hang out and spend Quality Time together. "So, what does the stuff do?"

"This doesn't do very much. Like I said, it's just a precursor. When it's baked, it's a cognitive remixer—it gives you synaesthesia, among other things. Creative types use it to taste their paintings, smell their tunes, and so on." Della shook her head and laughed. "There's a whole subculture called the Symmetric Aesthetic, with 'sense-

balanced' art and edible equations and stuff you have to be totally off your head to appreciate. I dabbled in it myself when I was going out with one of the theorists. . . .

"But that was a long time ago. The remixer isn't important. It pays my ticket, but I wouldn't have got it if you hadn't been here. You're far more important to me than—" Della made a dismissive gesture toward the bag of powder.

"So what do you want to do?" asked Marian again.

"I want to get to know you," Della said. "I realize I can't just walk into your life and expect you to have a Della-shaped hole ready and waiting. But I want to make the effort. I want to be here when you need someone you can talk to."

It sounded reasonable. She should give Della a chance, at least. "All right, but I have a busy life. There's a party tonight, I'm working in the shop tomorrow—"

"Then Sunday, maybe we could do something together. Suppose your mother hadn't died, what would you be doing?"

Marian gritted her teeth. "You're not Mom, damn it! Don't try to replace her."

"All right then, let's do something she never did. Something you'd like to do, but you never did with her."

"Give me some time to think about it," Marian said. "This is all a bit too much at once."

"Yes, I know. I remember the first time I met myself . . . well, that's another story. Look, how about I come back on Sunday afternoon? I'll think of something we can do, and you can suggest something, and between us we'll work something out."

"Or nothing," said Marian. "Don't take anything for granted."

"Hah! You'll do well. I hope you keep that same attitude with the boys. Make them work for it."

Della got up, packed away the Tupperware with its gray powder, and sauntered out of the door into the sunshine, leaving behind a pall of cigarette smoke and a suddenly silent kitchen.

Marian rinsed out the ashtray and put the mugs in the washbowl. Now the house felt small and empty. When her grandparents had left for the weekend, she'd looked forward to having the place to herself. But with Della gone, she felt alone. She should have asked Della to stay and cook dinner; that would have been something. It took all her self-control to refrain from running out into the street and demanding that Della come back to make beans on toast.

*No, don't sound desperate. Make her work for it, like she said.* Anyway, it was ridiculous to feel lonely when she had messages waiting, and friends ready to come over.

Ah, the friends. Trouble was, the more people you invited, the less they were your friends. Marian had a couple of confidants with whom she felt genuinely close. Beyond that, there were only brittle bonds of acquaintance based on superficial gossip. The others would come round for the party, not for her. They'd go to any empty house with a loud stereo system—anywhere that wasn't hanging around on street corners, sneering at the tourists. Any party where drinks or drugs might appear. . . .

No alcohol, Marian resolved. But some of them would probably bring it themselves. She couldn't stand at the door all night, warding off booze.

Well, maybe not a "party" party. Just a select gathering. Maybe just a girls' night. But half of the girls wouldn't come if there were no boys, so it wouldn't be much more than Marian's best buddies and no special occasion at all, hardly any point in even having the old folks out of the way.

It was like a syllogism. No booze—no boys. No boys—no girls. No girls—no party. Nothing.

Shit!

But why not just chill with her friends? They could still have fun and shake the



place up a bit. And it would be good to talk to the girls, tell them about Della's visit, get their thoughts on what to do and what to say.

Marian opened a can of low-calorie soup and ate it with an unbuttered slice of toast, adding some sliced cucumber as a token fresh vegetable. Then she texted her closest friends and invited them round for a "girls nite."

Annabel was the first to arrive, dressed in black with a holographic T-shirt of Lester Todd's new band. Marian didn't want to explain the whole Della situation several times over, so she'd planned to wait until everyone arrived before starting on it. But the subject was on her mind and wouldn't be suppressed. Soon it burst out.

"Do you spend much time with your mom?" Marian asked.

Annabel frowned. "She has this big thing about us all eating together. You know, sometimes you just want to snack on something while you're watching TV, but she won't have it. No, the entire family has to sit down at the table and be interrogated. My brothers joke about it: they say it's like those old films where the prisoners of war have to go to . . . the mess, is it? Where they eat, anyway, and the Nazis take the roll call, and in the film there's always one Nazi who talks to the prisoners and tries to catch them out, discover their escape plan. So we turn up to the dinner table and it's like a roll call—you need a doctor's note if you're missing. Then when we've all sat down, the cuffs spring out of the armrests to shackle us to the chairs, and the interrogation starts. 'How was your day at school?' 'How's your friend Marian doing?' 'Where's the escape tunnel?' Meanwhile Dad just sits there shoveling peas into his gut, and us kids are all kicking each other under the table to make each other laugh. . . . Is that what you meant?" Annabel looked at Marian with a concerned expression.

"I guess," Marian said, trying to hold her voice steady. "What else, apart from meal-times?"

"Well, we go shopping sometimes. There's Christmas, of course. And holidays used to be a big deal, though nowadays we try to ditch the parents as soon as we can. At first we tried to do our own thing in the evenings, and then we made a break for it earlier and earlier: in the afternoons, in the mornings straight after breakfast. It's the escape tunnel again. God, it sounds awful, doesn't it? But that's how it is. When kids get older, they don't want to hang out with their parents. Moms aren't cool, are they? We haven't talked about this before because your mother's dead, and I didn't ever want to complain about mine in case it sounded . . . well, you know. And 'complain' is the wrong word, anyway. I love my mom; it's just she can be a bit of a pain. As for spending time with her, we used to do a lot of crafts and stuff. Sewing and crocheting and embroidery. I haven't done any of that for a while. Maybe I could get back into it, if I ever had the time. . . .

"Oh Marian, I'm so sorry. Don't cry. No, no, let it out. Let it all out. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

On Sunday, when Della turned up wearing a short skirt and bizarre shoes that looked like sandals with high heels—were they fashionable on some other Earth?—Marian made an instant decision as to the afternoon's activity.

"Let's go walking," she said. She rarely went on hikes, tending to despise it as the hobby of tourists and eco-freaks. In her free time she much preferred going to Manchester or Leeds and doing some proper shopping, in a proper city where they had McDonald's and HyperSilk and lots of little market stalls selling sparkly bangles that Marian might occasionally steal on days when she felt particularly mischievous or melancholic.

But she knew the local paths and vantages, and she had a cruel impulse to drag Della up and down the steep sides of the valley. *Let's see how much you want it. You wanna spend time with me? Come on, here we go.* She recognized it as nasty manipulativeness, yet she was drunk on the power of being desired. And, she rational-

ized to herself, everyone did it. All teenagers took advantage of their parents, extorting pocket money, treats, privileges of staying up late and having boyfriends over. . . .

They headed out of town and walked across the little cobbled bridge to the riverside path. "There used to be mills all along this river," Marian said. "We did projects on them at school. One year we built a waterwheel, or we nearly did, but we kept spending all the lessons splashing each other."

Now the mills were coming back, in the grand new era of localism and renewable energy. A few full-size waterwheels belonged to businesses claiming to be off-grid and fully sustainable. "It's a load of hype," Marian said. "They put a picture of a waterwheel in their adverts to attract eco-freak customers and justify higher prices. We see it in the shop—crushed herbs and all that." She parodied the broad Yorkshire accent used on TV adverts: "*Locally grown, and locally crushed under the waterwheel trip-hammers, driven by the pure water of the Pennines, powering mills for hundreds of years.* Like it makes a difference how the hammers are powered! We had a drought last year and the river was too low for the wheels. Somehow the supply of waterwheel-crushed herbs didn't seem to diminish. . . ."

Della frowned. "That's the second time you've complained about this New Age stuff. Why does it bother you so much?"

"I only mentioned it because we're out here by the river and the waterwheels. Look, there's one now." The wooden paddles moved slowly, majestically. The sun, reflecting off drips of water, made the great wheel glitter like a cascade of cheap jewels. Marian went on, "It's just that everything is so fake nowadays. I shouldn't complain: I go shopping and I can't afford brand-name handbags, so I get cheap knock-offs instead. But at least I know they're fake. Does that mean everyone who comes to the Cauldron knows it's all fake as well, the whole pile of New Age bullshit? Why do they bother? This entire town is fake, full of restored old buildings recreating the 'authentic mill experience.' And on Friday when I was wondering which friends to invite to my party, I realized half of those friendships are bogus. You never know who's going to smile at you one day, and backstab you the next. It's a fake town full of fake people buying fake stuff. . . ."

"Then along comes your fake mother," said Della. "You think I'm false. But I haven't pretended to be anything I'm not."

"No, it's not about you. I've felt this way since long before you turned up." *But you're right*, thought Marian, *you are a fake.*

Della looked at Marian but didn't speak, silently creating a space for Marian to talk on.

"I know what the psychobabble explanation would be," said Marian. "It's projection. My life feels fake because my mom died; it's not what my real life should be. I'm imagining something perfect where Mom's still alive, where Dad isn't in prison. Maybe there is a universe like that somewhere—I guess there has to be. But this world is just a bad fake, like one of those cheap replica handbags where the stitching is all wrong. This isn't my real home."

As Marian spoke, she walked faster and faster, fueled by futile anger, and Della trotted behind to keep up. At the end of the riverside path, they walked along the road till they reached the woods of Hardcastle Crag. Here the road veered away up the moors, and only a graveled track continued through the trees. Rivulets splashed and gurgled across the track; Della's shoes soon became encrusted with mud, but she made no complaint.

Marian thought about the world Della came from, just one of an infinite range of worlds where things had happened differently—mostly going wrong in various ways. It felt like there was one real universe, a shining summit where everything happened as it should: a needle-thin pinnacle, surrounded by endless swampy lowlands

full of bad decisions, unlucky accidents, and damaged people. As you slogged through the mire, could you clamber up to some better state? But how, when you couldn't see the landscape of probability? You'd find yourself flailing inevitably downward to your doom, confronted with far more wrong options than right. And everyone else in the world plummeted down too, dragging you with them. Even if you did the right thing, you had no control over other people's mistakes, their car crashes and jail sentences. Every time you slept, the world fell a little further during the night.

No wonder Della wanted to find a better Earth. Flitting across universes, she was like someone driving a car where everyone else walked. But even with a car, the lowlands were immensely vaster than the highlands. The perfect peak of utopia was so lofty and slender that you couldn't see it. Yet somewhere there might be smaller local peaks, like islands in the swamp. If there was only one real universe and an infinite number of fakes, maybe a few of those fakes would be tolerable—just as high-class counterfeits were almost indistinguishable from designer goods.

How to find even a tiny pinnacle? Marian was overwhelmed by the thought of all the necessary choices: so many paths in the wood, so many mistakes she could make.

At last they reached the café at Gibson Mill. The site had been a cotton mill in the nineteenth century, then a dance hall and skating rink in the early twentieth century; then after long dilapidation, it had been restored by the National Trust, complete with smugly worded display boards proclaiming the virtues of environmentalism.

"What would you like?" asked Della.

"Apple juice," said Marian, "or whatever they've got." It was nice to have someone along who'd pay for things.

"Anything to eat?"

"Let's see . . . we've walked a couple of miles, with some up and down, so that's at least two hundred calories. I guess I could have a scone. It's a freebie!"

Della queued at the counter and came back with a tray of drinks and snacks. Marian put some blackcurrant jam on a scone, after moving the butter-dish behind the teapot so that she didn't have to look at it. The sight of butter or margarine always made her feel queasy—the yellow lumps of fat were repulsive.

She sensed Della's gaze, the hungry maternal gaze that absorbed everything about her, but Della didn't comment. Marian was pleased that Della didn't lecture her on fretting about her weight. She hated being told that weight didn't matter, when it so obviously did. It was just another way that adults lied, pretending the world was different, pretending that the fake surfaces didn't eclipse anything real that might lie underneath.

Della said, "Look at that guy. What a platter! If he's calibrating miles to calories, he must be walking the Pennine Way."

"All in one day," said Marian, laughing.

Conspiratorially, they glanced around at the tourists in the café, speculating on their private habits. It was trivial conversation, but all the more enjoyable for that.

"There's an old-fashioned rucksack," Marian said, "the one with the badges sewn all over it. I can't read them from here—where do you reckon the owner's been?"

"Amsterdam . . . twenty times."

"No, I reckon they're all in England. He looks like someone who'd boast about how virtuous his holidays are—I bet he's the type who volunteers to restore canals or repair footpaths."

"I'll go and ask." Before Marian could stop her, Della walked over to the rucksack's owner and spoke to him.

Marian couldn't hear what they said, but she watched Della smiling and gesturing expressively. *My God, is she flirting with him? I can see how she caught a dose!*

"I Was Nearly Your Mother"

Della returned and said, "You were nearly right. The badges are all bird stuff—he's one of those guys who'll go two hundred miles to see a weird-looking duck. But he's also a volunteer: he guards the nesting sites of rare birds to protect them from egg thieves. The breeding pairs are imported from less polluted Earths, and he helps to establish them here." She grinned, as though impressed by his idealism. "It takes all sorts, as they say at the liquorice factory."

Marian smiled in return. It almost felt normal, to sit and eat and chat, dissecting other people's little quirks. But she couldn't quite relax, because Della kept staring at Marian, as if memorizing her face for later description to the police.

"I'm sorry. I'm being rude," Della said. "It's just so hard for me to look at you. I thought I'd got over it, but I haven't. Every time I see you, I think about what happened, what I threw away. Why did I do it? Well, I know why. . . . But it was the worst decision of my life." Her voice trembled. "Can you ever forgive me?"

Around them, the noise of the café swelled and faded—the clatter of cutlery, the hiss of the coffee machine, the thud of the door as tourists came and went, their boots echoing on the stone floor. Marian wished she could hear a fire alarm going off, so that she wouldn't have to answer this question. It wasn't real to her, the fact that in another universe her mother had aborted her. She was alive here and now. What did it matter that in some other world, she didn't exist? If a different sperm had hit the egg, or if her parents had used contraception, Marian wouldn't exist. Why was it different to have an abortion? It meant nothing to Marian, but she knew she couldn't say that.

She squeezed Della's hand. "It's all right," she said, hoping that Della wouldn't break down in tears and cause a scene. "It's all right. I'm here. I forgive you."

"Really?" said Della.

"Really," Marian said, projecting as much sincerity as she could manage.

Della swallowed hard, and tried to smile. It was like watching a fallen fledgling struggle to take flight—flapping pathetically, squirming on the floor. "Let's go home," Della said, her voice high and tight.

They walked out of the café arm in arm. On the way home, Marian tried to lighten the mood by talking of inconsequential things—cats and shoes and sports. Della proclaimed herself an occasional badminton player. "I don't play as often as I should, but it's great for getting in shape and working off tension. If you're feeling frustrated, you can whack the shuttlecock as hard as you like, and it won't fly off into the distance. I did try playing tennis, but my friends got tired of chasing the ball after I kept smacking it way out of court!"

When they arrived back at Marian's house, it was late afternoon. Della plonked herself on the sofa and started flicking through TV channels. "Make yourself at home," Marian said pointedly. "It's the end of the weekend—I need to look at my schoolwork."

In her room, Marian began her usual homework-procrastination routine of checking her messages, texting friends, and looking for the latest gossip on the Net. An hour or so later, the bedroom door opened.

"Thought you might want a cup of tea," said Della.

Marian took the drink. "Thanks. But this is my room—knock before you come in!"

"Sure; I'm sorry." Della lingered in the doorway, gazing at everything in Marian's room, from the Lester Todd posters on the wall to the discarded jeans and lipsticks and nail-polish bottles on the floor.

"You can't stay here, you know," Marian said. "My grandparents will be back tomorrow."

"I understand," said Della. "I don't belong in this world, so it's difficult for me to fit in. Maybe you could come back to my world sometime. I'll show you the sights, and take you to a few parties."

Marian smiled. "It's a school day tomorrow." She spoke lightly, but recoiled from the idea of accompanying Della back to her home universe. However short a visit it might notionally be, she wondered whether she would ever come back. There'd be some excuse, some hitch to prevent Marian's return and ensure she stayed in Della's orbit.

"Maybe next weekend?" said Della.

"Maybe," said Marian. She realized that by saying *I forgive you*, she'd given Della the impression that they'd had a moment of bonding, a stepping-stone toward a deeper relationship. That wasn't something she was keen to encourage, having seen the depths of Della's neediness. Yet she couldn't bear to refuse Della directly.

"You don't sound very enthusiastic," Della said.

"Well, I didn't know you were carrying your Enthusiasm Quantification meter. If I'd known, then I would have spoken with 50 percent more glee and delight."

Della made a dismissive gesture as though batting away Marian's sarcasm. "Why don't you want to come and visit me?"

"Because it's too soon. You only turned up two days ago."

"And already you can't wait for me to leave and disappear?"

Marian sighed. "Must we have this conversation? I feel as though you're trying to push me into a corner." It was creepy, like being haunted by Mom's ghost.

Della marched into the room and flopped onto Marian's bed. "If I'm pushing, it's because you're resisting. Here I am, offering to do anything for you, and you're skulking in your room reading trash on the Internet. I've crossed universes to come here! You're an ungrateful little hussy, just like the others. When your mom died, you would have given anything to have her back. Now I'm back, and you can't wait for me to be gone!"

"What do you mean, just like the others?"

"Hah! That's you all over—ignoring everything else and focusing on yourself. I mean the other versions of you, obviously."

Marian stared at Della, waiting for her to explain. Della preened at being the object of attention. She sat on Marian's pillow and drew up her legs, hugging her knees, looking like an older and not-so-wiser version of one of Marian's friends arriving for a heart-to-heart.

"This isn't the first universe I've visited," Della said. "When I decided to see the child I never had, I hired the Navigators to do some mapping. There are worlds where my alternate—your biological mother—died at different times, or ended up in prison, or ran off with another guy and left you with your father. . . . I tried them all. That's how it feels, anyway. You're maybe the sixth or seventh version I've met. I thought it might be different this time, but you're just like the rest." Her head sank into her knees, muffling her voice. "You're always selfish. You always reject me!"

"If this is how you always behave, I can see why." Marian felt a tinge of pity for Della, but she also reckoned Della was laying on the pathos with a trowel, trying to guilt-trip her into . . . well, what? What had Della imagined would occur?

"This would have happened anyway," Marian went on, "even if you hadn't had an abortion. Your own child would have grown up and rebelled against you, rejected you, called you a shriveled old bitch who doesn't understand. That's how it is. Deal with it!"

As soon as she spoke, Marian experienced a stab of remorse. She'd been too harsh. It was as though four years ago someone had told her, "Your mom's dead—deal with it!"

She moved to the bed and squashed up next to Della. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I know it's hard for you."

Della rubbed her eyes. "No, you're right. If I'd had children, they would have defied me, insulted me, hated me—everything. It's not all sweetness and light, is it? Parents know there'll be bad days. But when a child reaches the rebellious phase, her parents can draw on years of happy memories, years of togetherness to help them

through the sticky patches. I haven't had that. I wanted the good times! I came to see you and we had . . . what, a weekend? That's after a few weeks with the other versions of you. Why, I only need to visit another hundred universes, and I might even get a whole year of good times! But then I'll have been rejected a hundred times as well. . . . I don't think I can stand that. I can't go on like this." Her voice cracked. "I just can't."

*Then don't*, thought Marian, but suppressed the reply as unhelpful. "You just need to handle your approach a bit better. Think of it like dating: if you come on too strong, it's counter-productive. It's too scary being on the other end of that. You're asking too much, too soon: trying to shadow my every move, trying to take me back to your world, all in a couple of days. Slow down!"

Della grabbed a tissue and blew her nose with a honking snort. "I know. That's what the last version of you told me. It's what I planned to do, but I couldn't hold back. There's no time to slow down! You're already fifteen. If I take it slowly, then by the time we get to know each other properly, you won't be a child any more. You won't need me at all."

"People don't stop needing family when they turn sixteen, or eighteen, or whatever age you're worried about. And it's not like I've got a terminal illness—" Marian paused with a sudden anxiety. "Not as far as I know. You haven't given me any dodgy genetics, have you?" She wondered if Della had aborted her because of a rare genetic defect just waiting to strike . . . thus explaining why Della was in such a rush to befriend her.

"No, not at all. Genes of the highest quality," said Della, trying to smile.

Marian knew that this was the moment where they were supposed to bond and hug. She had seen enough cheesy films; she could almost hear the soundtrack of syrupy strings soaring to a climax.

Yet she had also seen enough emotional blackmail within her social circle to recognize when she was being manipulated. Whether consciously or subconsciously, Della was trying to sidle into Marian's affections with the old "poor me" strategy, like a puppy whining about how often it had been kicked. After hearing that, surely no one would be so heartless as to kick it again. . . .

"The way you come on too fast isn't helping," Marian said, "but I think there's a more fundamental reason why your visits keep going wrong. You're asking for something that we can't give you . . . or we can, but it's not what you need. This afternoon, you asked if I could forgive you, and I do—I honestly do—but that hasn't helped you, has it? You're still not satisfied, you're still pushing, you still want more."

Della tried to interject, but Marian overrode her. "In your heart, you know that any forgiveness from me doesn't really mean anything. How can it? I'm fifteen years old, so by now there are millions of alternate Marians. I'm just me: I don't speak for all the others. You can't possibly beg forgiveness from every single version of me. And you shouldn't! There's only one person you really need it from—yourself." Marian paused and looked Della in the eye. "You need to forgive yourself for what happened."

Della broke Marian's gaze, and looked at the floor. She spoke in a soft, worn-out tone. "If I could forgive myself, I wouldn't be asking you."

"That hasn't worked, though, has it? Because you've asked and I've answered, but you're still here: you're still wanting more and more of me, wanting to spend every hour with me, wanting to drag me back to your world—"

"I was trying to be helpful!" exclaimed Della indignantly. "But you won't accept anything from me. You only said you forgave me because you were trying to get rid of me: you thought that's what I wanted, so you said it, and now you're disappointed I'm still here." Della's voice became ragged and hoarse. "You don't need me, you don't want me."



"No one needs a self-pitying self-obsessed wreck," said Marian, knowing it sounded unkind, but figuring it was the only way to get the message across. "You say you want to help, but how can you help anyone when you're so screwed up? Sort yourself out! Accept what happened. Deal with it! Then maybe you can go traveling across universes, if you still feel the urge. You'll be a better mother, or para-mother—whatever the word is—when you've come to terms with what happened, and when you're not demanding forgiveness wherever you go."

"Sort myself out?" Della laughed bitterly. "Get therapy, quit smoking, eat more fruit and veg. . . Yeah, a real makeover project. You think I haven't tried all that? You think I haven't tried to 'accept what happened'? That's why I came here!"

"Yes, but you arrive expecting gratitude that you've blessed us with your special presence, and you're too messed up to do a good job of it. You say you want to help, but you're not helping; you're just another problem for me to deal with." Marian stood up, and steeled herself to say what had to be said. "Go home, and call me when you're out of rehab!"

"I'm detecting a slight aura of frostiness," said Della. "I can take a hint." She unfolded her limbs and picked her way across the carpet to the doorway. "If you want to get in touch"—she left a long pause, which Marian didn't fill—"you can ping me through this." She tossed a small black gadget onto the bed.

Marian's eyes tracked the gadget, but she didn't pick it up.

"One last thing," Della said. "I will leave, but can I stay here tonight and leave tomorrow morning? It's just. . . ." She sounded tired and old. "It's too early in the evening—it's not even dark yet. If I leave now, then I'll end up going to some party somewhere. There's always a party on some world or other, always a party where you can find the illusion of company. And there's always some drug or other that gets handed around, something to fill the emptiness, some new way to scramble the brain and pretend you're having fun. . . . No, I can't go now. If I leave in the morning, there won't be any party to crash, and I'll have a few hours to find something better. . . ."

Seeing the despair etched into Della's face, Marian didn't have the heart to refuse. It was only one night, after all. And it couldn't become permanent, because her grandparents would return tomorrow. "All right, all right. You can stay in the spare room. But give me some space, okay? I really do need to get this work done."

"I understand. Tell you what, I'll go and see what I can rustle up for dinner, yeah?"

Marian forced a smile. "You do that."

Della headed downstairs. Marian slumped in her chair, emotionally exhausted by the confrontation. She remembered Mom singing along to the radio in the kitchen at the old house, baking simple things like flapjacks and cookies. Mom had never got the hang of pastry; she couldn't manage pies, so she made crumbles instead: gooseberry in summer, then apple and blackberry in autumn. Marian hadn't eaten one of those in years, and she had a sudden longing for an apple crumble with custard. The sound of Della clattering in the kitchen brought back memories of good times, memories that Marian had long suppressed as too painful. It made her wish for Mom back, and it made Marian wonder whether she'd been too harsh with Della.

*Damn you.* It affected her because it was uncalculated—one of the few times Della had been spontaneous rather than manipulative. Just "I'll see what I can rustle up."

Marian had to listen to three Lester Todd songs before she was calm enough to even attempt any homework.

The evening meal, when Della finally served it, proved to be curry with brown rice. Not the sort of meal that Mom would have prepared, but it wasn't bad. Marian had an instinctive prejudice against brown rice as being part of the whole New Age organic hippie bullshit regime, but she sampled a few forkfuls and had to admit that



there was nothing wrong with brown rice itself, only the people who usually ate it. After strawberry meringues for dessert, Marian could honestly say, "That was good. Thanks."

"Glad you approve," said Della, but she looked abstracted, staring out of the window into the twilight.

Marian retreated to her room, where she alternated between homework and Net-surfing and phoning friends. Downstairs she heard Della watching old comedy shows on TV.

"Can I have a goodnight kiss?" said Della, as bedtime approached.

Marian was sufficiently grateful for a histrionics-free evening that she submitted to being kissed and hugged. It felt good, like something she'd missed for so long that she'd stopped noticing the lack. "See you tomorrow," she said, and was surprised to find that she meant it.

In the morning, Marian saw no sign of Della downstairs. She'd subconsciously hoped that Della would have got up early and laid out breakfast, made sandwiches for a lunchbox, and so forth. Her cynical side accused herself: *You didn't want to engage with her as a mother, but you quite liked being cooked for and waited on, didn't you?*

Well, a big breakfast was too many calories anyway. Marian ate an orange, packed her schoolbag, and finally cracked open the door of the spare room to look in on Della. She was still in bed. Della had missed the opportunity to make one final appeal for a maternal relationship, but Marian was relieved not to have to go through all that again.

Marian left a spare key on the kitchen table, and wrote a note. "Please lock up and post the key back through the letterbox. Thanks for coming to see me and making the effort." She thought for a long minute before adding the final sentence. "I'll ping you on the wotsit." It wasn't a complete lie—she might decide she wanted to keep in touch. Yet it wasn't a definite commitment. It was like when a boy said, "I'll text you," Marian, who'd found it so frustrating when boys said that and didn't call, now empathized with their position. It was something that you felt you had to say, that you might even decide to do.

But probably not.

Marian grabbed her bag and headed out. For perhaps the first time ever, she looked forward to school on a Monday morning. The weekend had been an emotional roller coaster; she needed some time to recover her balance. Schoolwork and lunchtime gossip would be a welcome distraction. And when she came home, Della would be gone and everything would be back to normal.

She lingered after school, chatting with friends. Yet she knew she couldn't delay too long—she had to be home when her grandparents returned, if only to explain why the house stank of cigarettes.

When Marian opened the back door, she saw that the duplicate key lay on the table where she'd left it that morning, along with her scribbled note. Was Della still here? Silence filled the house. Marian hurried upstairs to the spare room.

The bed was occupied. A sour smell hung in the air, along with an aura of stillness that made Marian's throat tighten in foreboding. A red light flashed on the bedside table.

Unwillingly, Marian approached the bed. She wanted to shout, "Wake up!" but she knew it was useless. Della's head lolled on the pillow, her eyes open and staring nowhere. No movement. No sound of breathing. The smell was stronger, a stink of piss and something Marian didn't recognize. *Some drug or other*, her instinct said.

Marian had done a first-aid course—just a few hours, covering the basics. She

knew she ought to do something, but it had all leaked out of her head, and she couldn't bring herself to touch the body. *The body*. Already she thought of it as a corpse. Della was dead.

The flashing red light drew Marian's eye, demanding her attention. It was the gadget that Della had given her last night. When she touched it, the display lit up, showing one voice message. *Get it over with*. Marian tapped her fingernail on the Play icon.

"I'm sorry, darling. I'm sorry to leave you like this. When I asked about staying here last night, I thought things might look better in the morning. But they don't, and they won't ever. There's only emptiness ahead of me now. I used to be a party girl, and when the party ends, what's left but to clear up the mess and throw out the dregs?"

"They say that everything happens in all possible worlds. So I guess this had to happen, and you're just unlucky it happened here. Maybe in another universe there's a version of me who carries on and finds the daughter she never had; or who doesn't find her, but manages to keep going anyway.

"It was my fault it didn't work out with us. I only wish . . . well, there's no time for me to tell all the things I wish had happened, or hadn't. There's a lifetime of them. I hate to think it's all been for nothing, but if I've only been an Awful Warning, then at least. . . . Oh, what am I saying? Should've planned this better, as always. . . .

"I've left you my comp with all the accounts and passwords open—you can spend the money, you can hop across worlds, you can do anything. I just hope you can find something worthwhile. . . ."

There followed a long pause, punctuated by choked sobs. "There's nothing more to say, nothing more to do. How can it end like this? But it has to end somewhere, and I can't go any further. Goodbye, Marian. Love you, God bless."

The recording ended, and the red light winked out.

Marian stumbled downstairs and phoned for an ambulance. Her voice was thick, and she had to speak several times before the operator could understand her. When she got off the phone, she rushed outside. She didn't want to be in the house with the body; it made her skin crawl. When Mom died, it had been so sudden that Marian only saw the body when laid out in the coffin, carefully covered to hide the worst of the injuries. She'd had time to brace herself; she'd had other family there to support her.

Now, she was alone. Again. Her emotions churned, all jumbled up together. She felt grief for Della's death, horror at the appalling waste of it. Yet she was relieved that Della was gone . . . and ashamed for feeling relieved. A heavy burden of guilt accompanied the thought that her rejection of Della must have contributed to the tragic outcome, even though Della had been palpably unbalanced anyway.

Most of all, she was angry at Della for being so selfish, so manipulative. All that talk about "there's a version of me who carries on," "I've left you the accounts and passwords," "you can hop across worlds"—it transparently meant that Della wanted Marian to go and find some other alternate of Della, and make up with her. She hoped that Marian would feel guilty at rebuffing Della and driving her to suicide. She expected Marian to atone for it by becoming a daughter to another version of her. Just as Della had repented of her past actions and hopped across worlds in search of forgiveness, she wanted Marian to do the same. *See how it feels! See what you've driven me to!* That was the message, and Marian hated Della for it.

What a futile, histrionic gesture. As if suicide even meant anything. . . . In an infinite array of alternate Dellas, one suicide wouldn't make much of a dent. Marian wasn't big on math, but surely infinity minus one was still infinity. Della knew there'd be alternates of her who decided against it, or who didn't quite overdose.

*Everything happens in all possible worlds.* There were alternates who survived. And so suicide wasn't the grand gesture of ending all existence; it was merely a tiny scratch in the overall Della. It was a version of self-harming, like those girls who cut themselves or starved themselves—Marian knew a couple of them at school. It was their only way of expressing their pain.

And with that thought, Marian's sympathies swung abruptly, and she found herself pitying Della for getting into such a state that suicide was her only way out. How terrible it must feel to have messed up your life so badly that killing yourself felt like the only possible action. Where did it all go wrong for Della? Was it the abortion? No, surely it wasn't that one single thing in itself. It was all the years before and afterward, the years of drugs and partying and sleeping around. The trouble with living for the moment is that you've nothing to look forward to but more of the same. And when you can't stand that any more—you have nothing else.

The ambulance arrived, its siren a funeral knell. Two paramedics ran to the house, carrying first-aid equipment and a stretcher.

"Upstairs," said Marian. She stood aside to let the men go by. Their boots pounded up the stairs, rattling the old house.

She didn't follow them. There was nothing she could do, yet it still felt cowardly not to go up there. *I'd only be in the way*, she rationalized to herself.

Very soon they came out, carrying Della on the stretcher, moving more slowly because they had to be careful with the burden; but Marian sensed they knew it was too late to save her. She walked with them to the ambulance.

"Do you know what she took?" one of them asked.

"I'm sorry, I don't. There might be something in her handbag—"

"Yeah, we got that. We'll look at it."

They stowed Della inside the ambulance, where delicate expensive machinery began its futile checklist of survival.

"You can come with us if you like, but you don't have to."

Marian shook her head.

"Do you have someone you can call? Or would you like one of us to stay with you?"

"My grandparents are coming home soon. They'll be here any minute. I'll be all right." It was just a rote phrase, but it sounded callous as soon as it came out of Marian's mouth. *She's dead, but I'll be all right. She wasn't my mother anyway.*

"If you're sure. . ."

After a pause just long enough for any change of mind, they drove away. When the ambulance had turned a corner and disappeared in the maze of narrow streets, Marian raised a hand in farewell. It felt like a ludicrous gesture, waving goodbye to an ambulance carrying a corpse, but she had an urge to do something, to make some meaningful movement. She couldn't just stand there like a stuffed cabbage. *Goodbye, Della.*

She paced round the garden once, twice, then sat down at the kitchen table and put her head in her hands. The tears leaked through her fingers. *Goodbye, Mom.*

It was like being bereaved all over again. How dare Della put her through this? The selfishness of it! It brought home the terrible finality of death. Mom was never coming back.

But in some other universe, her mother had survived the accident. Of course, there'd also be a parallel Marian in that reality. Yet everything must happen, so a similar universe must exist in which the local Marian had just died. In that world, Mom was bereaved and would surely welcome a visit from her daughter. . . .

*I've left you all the accounts and passwords—you can hop across worlds.*

Only now did Marian truly understand the temptation. She could find her mother. She would learn from Della's mistakes, and not push too hard. Besides, Mom would

be overjoyed to have her back. They could make everything right again. Marian could find the one real universe, the shining pinnacle where everything was perfect. She didn't have to live in a fake world, full of flaws.

The temptation swept through Marian, filling her with grief and longing. She yearned to put things right, to see her mother alive again. The past four years felt like a nightmare, from which she could wake by snapping her fingers.

But the example of Della showed that it wasn't so simple. If you chased fulfillment across worlds, you ended up deluding yourself that happiness could be found in some faraway place, rather than in your own heart. The more you searched outside, the less you healed inside.

How long had Della been searching, before she gave up? The better the world you wanted—the more specific your requirements—the longer it must take to find.

Even if you found the world you wanted, it wouldn't last. Something else would go wrong; some misfortune would strike, casting you down from the summit. You would have to keep traveling, spending your whole life in a vain search for utopia.

No, Marian wouldn't go looking for her mother. She already knew where Mom was: in the cemetery, and in her memories.

Marian wiped away the tears and blew her nose. She had to carry on as best she could. *Deal with it.* She belonged here, in this imperfect world.

Fake perfume could smell just fine; a counterfeit handbag would still hold all your essentials; knock-off jeans could make you look pretty damned good . . . as long as you put in the effort. If you didn't have the real thing, you made the best of whatever you had.

She trudged upstairs, forcing herself to enter Della's room. The sour smell of desperation and death still hung in the air. Marian opened the windows and stripped the bed. Then she picked up the black gadget—the gate to all those other worlds—and took it into her own room, wondering what to do with it.

Marian didn't want to use the thing, but simply throwing it away would be disrespectful. Where could she keep it? Her gaze snagged on the cabinet that contained her memorabilia of Mom. She opened the bottom drawer, but as soon as she saw the old photo albums and the scarf Mom had knitted, she shivered and slammed the drawer shut.

Should she put Della's things with Mom's? It would be like admitting that Della really was her mother after all.

If she thought Della wasn't Mom, but only a hideous fake that polluted her mother's memory, then she should put the gadget somewhere else—maybe in the stockroom at the Cauldron, along with all the bogus potions.

It was tempting to idealize Mom, to claim that poor pathetic Della wasn't remotely the same person. *You're not my mother*, Marian had said. But how true was that? If Mom had survived, would everything be sunshine and roses? Of course not.

Marian's own personality had elements—her shoplifting, her faddish eating—of which she was less than proud. As the years passed and worlds diverged, some of her alternate selves would inevitably slide downward. At what point would they stop being her, and become someone else?

She shook her head. She didn't know the answer, but it felt too easy to say that you could define your identity as comprising only faultless high achievers, while disowning your darker aspects. They all contributed in their own fashion.

Marian opened the drawer that held her relics of Mom, and stuffed Della's gadget way down in the bottom corner, under the photo albums containing pictures of the frozen, vanished past.

Hearing her grandparents at the garden gate, she ran down to greet them and welcome them home. ○

# GOD IN THE SKY

An Owomoyela

An Owomoyela tells us that “after the July 2009 Jupiter impact, I got into an argument over how NASA and the other professionals could miss what was then estimated to be a Europe-sized object hurtling through space. Never mind that Jupiter, thirteen thousand times the volume of Earth, is as small as a star in our night sky. Any stellar feature large enough to be obvious would have to be impossibly large or impossibly close.” Thinking about that argument led to the author’s first story for *Asimov’s*. An is a graduate of the University of Iowa and the 2008 Clarion West Workshop. The author’s publications include stories in *ChiZine*, *Fantasy*, and *Apex Magazine*. An can be found online at <http://an.owomoyela.net>.

Three hours after the light flared into the sky, I finally got in touch with Dad. We were frantic, both talking at once: he said, “But we don’t have much information yet,” while I was saying, “There are already theories on the internet”; I said, “This isn’t the Dark Ages, this isn’t an omen,” when he started laughing, saying “People are lining up at church already.” That was Tuesday.

Two hours after that, when I reached my grandfather, we spoke in similar breathless terms. After he invited me to his ranch home, though, just before he hung up, he said words I’d only heard before in pop politics.

*Allahu akbar.*

Seventy minutes on the interstate took me to my grandfather’s. The light in the sky was indistinct—in daylight you could mistake it for a smudge of cloud, except it was too perfectly round and looked farther away than the blue sky. I pulled in on the gravel road, handling my car like the horses my mother loved to ride, and when I got it lined up by his old Chevy, he was waiting for me on the wood porch with a grin that went up to his eyes. He was seventy-eight. His salt-and-pepper hair was giving way to salt and his dark face was laced with wrinkles, but he trotted down and opened my door for me. When we hugged, it felt like life took nothing out of him except the fat from his middle age and weight from his step.

“You can help me sort the lentils,” he said.

We both glanced up before we went in.

“Your father called,” my grandfather said, kicking off his sandals to walk barefoot on the red carpet. “He said you called him. What a kick. I think each person in this family has tried to call everyone else, but no one’s heard a peep from your mother. Have you talked to her?”

“She’s working on an education initiative in Monrovia,” I said. “Their networks went down. I got a really short email this morning to let me know she was alive, but other than that . . .”

"She's probably out there, annoyed that she knows we're worried," my grandfather said. "She was always too independent for anyone, your mother. That's why Paul couldn't hang on to her. Come on."

We headed into the kitchen to commit what my mother used to call atrocities against American cuisine: pizza topped with lentils and caramelized onions, rice on the side, bottles of peach homebrew pulled out from his fridge, and frozen grapes for dessert.

"I found," he said, when we'd put the lentils on to simmer and retreated to his patio to watch the empty stable yard, "my old telescope hiding up in the attic, put away with your dad's old schoolbooks. We should bring it down."

"We should," I agreed, though neither of us got up from our conversation until we went back in for our food.

My grandfather talked with his hands. He often said, "If you cut off my hands, I'd go mute!" Today all his gestures tended toward the sky, toward the pale half-dollar sitting opposite the moon. Over pizza, I finally asked.

"Are you converting to Islam?"

That surprised him. I reminded him of what he'd said on the phone, and he laughed. "Oh, that. I don't know. I was in a state. I don't know why I said it. I never really thought about converting back."

"Back?"

"You didn't think I was agnostic as a boy in Egypt, did you?" he chided. "I came over here and I decided to be American through and through. First that meant being Christian and owning a business. Then all the people I knew became agnostic and I did too."

I laughed. "You go with whatever religion's in vogue?"

He feigned offense. "I'm easily convinced by articulate individuals."

"And you're meeting a lot of articulate Muslims here on the ranch?"

My grandfather gave me an annoyed look. That one wasn't feigned. "No, of course not. As I said, I was in a state. It was a few words from my childhood." At that, the annoyance faded. "It's an old man thing, Katri. One day you'll get old and start reminiscing too."

He tossed a grape at me. I ducked to catch it in my mouth, but it hit my chin and bounced off. My grandfather hopped to his feet.

"I'm going to pull down that telescope," he said. "Then you'll have to stay until the sun goes down."

"I'll drink all your beer and have to stay all night," I told him.

"I'll convert back to Islam just for you," he called from the door. "To keep the evils of homebrew out of your hands." And with that he vanished inside the house, and I was left wondering why the jibe turned sour in my ears.

We had to clean both lenses of the telescope, and setting it up took us until the sun was down. The base had to be screwed together, and most of the screws had gone missing. Of course, we found the screwdriver behind his entertainment center around the time the last colors of sunset were fading from the sky—it'd probably been there since he'd put the TV hutch together.

Always a gentleman, my grandfather made me take the first look, although he also insisted I look at the light before I tried to see anything else.

I don't know what I expected; more powerful telescopes than this had already failed to reveal any information. Through the lens, the object was just diffuse light, like a flashlight shining through paper. I let out a breath and stepped back to let my grandfather see.

"It's a bit of a disappointment."

"Only you would say that about the most . . ." He waved at the night sky, taking the telescope. "What would you call it? Miraculous? Terrifying? Only you would say

that about the most interesting object up there." He adjusted the focus. "What do you suppose it is?"

I leaned back. "Something new, probably," I said. "Something no one's invented a word for yet."

He laughed. "Well, what good is that? All the important events in life—love, birth, death, family—all of them have had names for thousands and thousands of years. All these new ideas like virtual economies and carbon offsets? Those are only important in the day-to-day."

"Yeah, we live day to day," I pointed out. "Life's day to day."

"Katrina," he said, looking at me. "You just remember that whatever happens out there is nothing compared to what happens down here," he said, and patted his chest just above his heart.

"All right," I said. "I'll make a motivational poster with the light and that quote."

"Good." He grinned. "Market it. That's my granddaughter, off to be an entrepreneur! I want a share in your profits."

I chuckled. "Of course you do."

It wasn't late, but by then I was missing my bed and my girlfriend, and I'd had time to sober off the beer. I excused myself, and my grandfather walked me to the door. He kissed me on the cheek. "Give Josey a kiss for me!"

I laughed and told him I would.

MAYOR CALLS NIGHT-SKY OBJECT "GOD," read the headline in the paper the next day. The bold pull quote said MAYOR MCMAHON OF SAN ANGELO, TEXAS, CAUSED AN UPROAR SATURDAY BY SAYING "THIS LIGHT IS CERTAIN PROOF OF GOD; IT MAY BE GOD IN HIS GLORY."

I read it when Josey put her laptop down on the kitchen table in front of me. It was only seven and we were both up, both in robes, her with the morning's first cup of coffee and me with a phone to my ear. Josey turned back to the window after handing off the laptop, her powder-blue robe looking softer in the early morning light.

"Yeah," I said into the mouthpiece, like I'd been saying any time my advisor let me get a word in edgewise. "No. Yeah, I understand. Yeah. I hope so too. Okay." I counted on him running out of stuff to explain after a while, and after a while, he did. We hung up. "The research office is going on hiatus," I told Josey, who looked back with the sort of bleary-eyed tired interest I used to get from my grandfather's old dog. "The other assistant bailed. He doesn't know if this is what he wants to be doing. Said he wanted to spend time with his mother."

"Because the world is ending," Josey said.

"Something like that. Dr. Greene says he'll find work for me to do, keep me paid, but who knows *what*. Maybe loan me out to another department. Rain gauges in the Chihuahuan, or something. Trapping and tagging snipes."

Josey rolled the mug between her hands, watching the reflections in the coffee, then shook her head. "Here." She sashayed up to the table and slipped into the chair beside me. "I thought you'd be interested. There's a science section. They say in twenty years..."

She reached across to click a link, calling up some Flash page blinking with layman's statistics. I put away the phone and took a look at it—most of it was the same stuff I'd been reading for days; how the light had appeared, how many people had called it in to NASA, but there was some information I hadn't seen before. I read through most of it with detached interest until one item gave me pause. "Whoa."

"Nelly?" Josey said. I grabbed a stray envelope and looked across the table for a writing implement, but nothing was in evidence. "Yeah. In twenty years? It's supposed to fill the night sky."



The way she said that, it was almost a question. Like maybe she hadn't read that right. I frowned at the screen. "You have a pencil?"

"I hid a few in your robe pockets," Josey said. I looked down and rummaged in one: sure enough, there were a pair of golf pencils waiting for me. Josey leaned over, brushing hair off her shoulder. "What is it?"

"Arc seconds," I said, and started a line of calculations. Josey rested her chin on my shoulder, hanging on the movement of the lead. I finished the calculation and re-read it before answering. "Okay. Yeah, if it keeps growing the way it is. I mean, the Earth turns, it's gonna rise and set, but the math's right. Horizon to horizon."

Josey pulled away and looked down into her mug, running her thumb around and around the circumference. "What happens to us then?"

I paused in the middle of putting the pencil back. "What makes you think anything will happen?"

Josey shrugged and mumbled some indistinct syllables.

I drummed the pencil against the table. "Actually, what makes you think that it's even gonna happen?"

"What, the news?" she asked.

"Josey," I said, turning on my chair to tilt my head at her. "Name one entity in the universe that just grows and keeps growing forever. I mean, other than the *universe*." I dug the pencil point into the envelope. "It flared already, and now it's slowed down. Stars explode and then they collapse again. Gamma bursts flash up, make a lot of noise, and then vanish. This light is not gonna keep growing; it's not gonna fill the night sky."

Josey shrugged. She raised her cup and downed the rest of the coffee in one gulp, then set it down hard and gave a defiant look at the face I'd pulled.

"Your lab isn't happening. I don't have class until this afternoon. You know what? Let's go back to bed."

I rolled my neck. "Josey . . ."

"Just snuggle!" Josey protested, and shut her laptop. I closed my eyes. "The world might be ending."

"It's not ending."

"Just come be with me," Josey said.

I opened my eyes again. "It's not God and it's not gonna end the world," I said, but I got up and followed Josey into the bedroom anyway.

I usually tried to make it out to my grandfather's ranch once a month or so, but I drove up later that day. A two-hour round trip wasn't bad, with my lab canceled and me with nothing else to do. Not as bad as the half-hour spent waiting for a gas pump, or the clogged street in front of the grocery store where the entire community was buying water and canned food. My grandfather and I followed form from last time, sitting out back and watching the sky after we'd eaten, waiting for it to get dark enough to look through the telescope again. Except for the almost-imperceptible growth, the light looked the same as it had the day before, and the day before that.

"All those stars and galaxies seem little," my grandfather said, blocking the light with his thumb. "See there?" He wagged his thumb at me. "Only as big as the deck lamp."

I snorted. "It's a lot farther away, gramps."

"And how far would that be? Hmm?" He tilted his head at me, smile roguish. "You being the expert."

I stared at him for longer than I should have. He was joking, though it struck me that he was right. I was the first generation on my father's side to study the sciences. My grandfather had come from Egypt and gone into business, and my father had studied history and become a teacher. I was the authority.

I put my drink aside and pulled him up from his chair. "Here. Look at this."

I pulled him to the spot on the patio that gave us the best view of the night sky, uncut by trees or the line of the roof.

"Objects look smaller the farther away they are, right?"

"Yes; I know that," he said. I searched among the stars for a certain speck and pointed up toward it.

"You could line up twenty-two Earths in a row, and that's how wide across Jupiter is," I told him. "And look. Up there, in the sky, it's only that big. Okay?"

He nodded. "Very far away," he agreed.

I searched out another point in the night sky and guided him to it, describing the line through a constellation until I knew he saw what I saw. "Jupiter orbits the Sun. Think Jupiter's big compared to the Earth? The Sun's five Jupiters across. And all of our planets and their orbits describe a solar system that make the sun look like a marble in a kiddie pool, and the space between solar systems makes those solar systems look like . . . I don't know." I was running out of metaphor. "The galaxy is big, gramps. We don't have words for how big it is. But that pinprick, right there? That's not a star. It's a galaxy."

I heard him take a breath.

I shivered, and looped my arm through the crook of his elbow. I'd never had a sense of agoraphobia until taking astronomy classes in undergrad, but the universe yawned open on every side of the Earth. It seemed designed for something bigger. All the planets and all the stars were grains of sand scattered in an ocean, and that half-dollar light was supposed to fill the night sky.

"We can calculate how far away that galaxy is," I said, and my voice was so soft that I didn't know if he'd hear it. "But we can't work out the math for that light. Sometimes we can tell how close a star in a galaxy is, but we're not seeing any stars. Or we can tell how redshifted a galaxy is—the more red, the farther away—but that light's not redshifted at all, not that we can tell. That means maybe it's not part of our expanding universe . . ."

I trailed off.

We turned. The light was small, but far larger than the stars.

"The worst part is, we've seen galaxies pass in front of it," I said. "The light is farther away than that galaxy." I pointed back to the speck that looked like a star. "And it's still that big in the sky."

I leaned into my grandfather, and he held onto my arm. Our fingers were tight.

"I'm wondering what the Koran would say," my grandfather murmured.

"It's just something new," I said. "It's something scientific. Like a nova. You don't go to the Koran for that; you build a better telescope."

My grandfather exhaled, then patted my hand. He was still watching the light. He was probably still thinking about the Koran, just like all those people who had rushed to church on Tuesday morning were looking to the Bible for answers.

Mayor McMahan had said it. This was what people were calling God.

"I'm going to go see her," Dad said over the phone.

Her in this case was Mom. Mom, at this time, was still in Monrovia. Monrovia, at the moment, was still trapped in communications brownouts.

I was pretty sure Dad had gone insane.

"News is still coming out of Liberia," I said. "We'd know if anything horrible happened."

"That's not the point," Dad said.

I was pretty sure the rest of the world had gone insane, too.

Outside the window, my next-door neighbor was cleaning out the shed I'd never seen

him use. A rusted-out lawnmower and cans of old paint were scattered on his brown lawn, and earlier I'd seen him carrying a box labeled "EMERGENCY GENERATOR."

"I never did speak to your mother as much as I should have after the divorce," Dad went on. "We promised each other we'd still be a part of each other's lives, and we haven't been fulfilling that promise."

"That doesn't mean you just hop on the first transatlantic flight," I argued.

"Maybe it should," Dad said. "Say what you will, but this event—"

"Dad."

"—this event has put everything in perspective. There's enough we don't have control over. This, I do."

*Or maybe we're all just going to use that light as an excuse to panic*, I thought. It was like Y2K all over again, except along with stocking up on emergency candles and nonperishable food, every man, woman, and child dropped what they were doing and went to visit everyone they knew. "Dad, you have a job, and projects, and you can't just—"

"I'm packing."

"You can't—"

"Don't tell me what I can't do."

I dug my knuckles into the bridge of my nose. "Dad. You can't just pack up and move to Liberia."

"They say that thing in the sky can't exist, too," Dad countered. "Maybe 'can't' doesn't mean what we used to think it did."

"Dad, that's completely different."

Dad didn't care.

"Look, people are on the news taking loans out for domestic flights," I tried. "An international—"

"So I'll have to pay a little more," he said. This from a man who'd haggled for a week on the price of my car. "I'll manage. Maybe I'll get a one-way ticket and wait for the public to calm down before I come back."

"Okay," I said. "Right. And people will calm down, because nothing is *happening*."

"Katrina," he said, with the tone he used when Mom harried him too hard.

That's when I knew I'd lost the argument.

I was lying facedown on the bed when Josey came home, and when she joined me I rolled straightaway into her arms and told her the whole story, or what I thought was the whole story. My research partner had disappeared into a crisis of academia, my dad was off to Africa, and my grandfather might convert to Islam. "Because of what? Because there's a bit of the universe we don't understand. If people knew how much we don't understand, we'd never get anything done."

Josey listened and made comforting noises until I stopped talking. Then she pursed her lips, considered, and said, "Do you need me to stay around for a bit?"

I stared at Josey the way people must have stared at that light when it flared into the sky. "What do you mean, 'stay'?"

"I mean *stay*, stay," Josey said. "I thought—you know. I know the world isn't ending, but with everything going on—"

"You're leaving?" I asked.

"I'm coming back," she said, with a look of reproach. "But I want to see my family in Tennessee. That's all right, isn't it? Just for a week or so? You've got your grandpa so close by."

I fought off the strangling feeling in my throat. "Just a week?" I said, because I couldn't tell her it wasn't okay. The entire country was going home to their families. I just wanted to stay there, to complete my research, to leave the light to astronomers. Every day some organization put up another grant, another contest, an-

other prize; we'd figure it out because science figured things out, because science, as much as nature, abhorred a vacuum.

Josey leaned over and kissed me on the forehead, and I felt small beside her mass. I wanted that mass to stay right where I could hang onto it, a planet embracing its sun's gravity. "I'll bring you back some real channel catfish."

I showed up at my grandfather's house with a backpack in the front passenger seat, the radio tuned to NPR, and a tension in my jaw I couldn't relax through gum or massage or willpower. I hadn't even called first; my grandfather wasn't out front waiting for me, and it took a minute before he opened the door. I just stood there and pounded, smelling the crisp night, feeling the breezes on the back of my neck, trying not to scream at the slowly growing light in the sky.

When the door opened I stood there for a moment with my fist raised. My grandfather and I both looked at each other, surprised; I suppose I'd thought that he had disappeared, too. But he was there, he laughed, he ushered me inside. "Come to stay the night?"

"Can I?"

He took my backpack, closing the door behind me.

I was drifting toward the living room when I heard voices talking. I hesitated—I thought he had someone over—but it was only one voice, and it wasn't pitched like a conversation, it was pitched like a lecture. I turned back to him.

"What is that?"

"Hmm?" My grandfather looked genuinely surprised. "Oh, that? It's one of those internet radio stations. I don't know if it's any good yet. Well." He laughed as he took my backpack, tucking it into the hall closet between a pair of dusty boots and the old telescope. "I've been listening to it all evening. I didn't realize how far my Arabic's slipped."

I could feel my face fall, and when he straightened up again I wrapped my arms around him. He hugged back, but not for long before he ducked his head to nudge my forehead with his own. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," I said. "Dad's going to Liberia. Don't ask me how he booked a flight to Liberia. I still haven't talked to Mom. Our lab shut down. Even Josey's gone. I know, I sound fourteen, but you're all leaving me . . ."

My grandfather showed his palms. "I'm not going anywhere, Katrina."

"You're going—" I bit off the end of the sentence. How stupid was it to finish the thought, *You're going back to Islam?*

He reached over, rubbing my shoulder. "Come on," he said. "Come have some coffee and we'll talk about this."

I put myself together and motioned for him to go on into the kitchen. I followed him, taking a seat at the counter and kicking my heels against the rung of the stool. Childish, yes, but it helped.

I watched him go through the motions of making coffee just as he always had: adding in cardamom and cinnamon to the burr grinder, pouring the beans without bothering to measure them. It was the same. He was the same as he'd been when I was a child, when we'd lived in the city, when he'd made that coffee every morning before school and enticed me to drink some. *It'll start off your day right, Katri.*

"Will you be going on the Hajj?" I asked. It was the only sensible question about Islam I knew enough to ask, aside from *What about me and Josey?*, and I wasn't ready to ask that yet.

He shook his head. "I don't know. I don't think I should jump in with both feet, do you? It wouldn't be right to go on the Hajj only to think in the middle, 'Oh, no, this isn't right for me.'"

"But you never thought Islam was right for you before, did you?" I pressed. "Christianity either. And you raised me and Dad outside the church. Any church."

My grandfather breathed out through his mouth, turning to pour the coffee. "I never in my life felt terribly religious. But this light," he said, "it's probably the sort of event that changes our lives forever—"

"No!" I jumped at the sound of my own voice. "Man probably did this at the first eclipse, too. They looked up and saw the sun being eaten and they thought it was the end of the world. But it wasn't. We don't understand everything. So what? We'll learn. And the world will keep changing and we'll learn to deal with that, but we're all acting like it's the end of the world!"

My grandfather looked at me. Then he looked down into his coffee. I was reminded of Josey; of her asking, *What happens to us then?*

I wanted to know what was happening to us now.

"Katri," he said, after a moment. "These things that people are doing. They're important."

I started to object, but he didn't let me.

"So what do you want us all to do, when the world changes around us? Hm? Dig our heels in like you're doing?"

"I'm not—" I said. And then, "I'm just not panicking."

"You're dealing with the light very well," he conceded, and drank from his mug.

*The light.*

But the light, for all that it had sent Dad to Liberia and Josey to Tennessee, hadn't sent me seventy minutes down the interstate to drink coffee in my grandfather's kitchen. That had been Josey, it had been Dad, it had been the people buying gas and generators like they'd need to dig in tomorrow for a white night sky—maybe—in twenty years.

"You think I'm acting fourteen, don't you?"

My grandfather set his coffee down. "No! No, I just think you're in over your head." He gestured, trying to paint an entire world with his hands. "If God gives you a reason to remember what's important in life, take it. That's all. And if everyone else takes it, that's wonderful. No one has to act like the world's on fire."

I studied his face for any hint of rapture. "Do you think it's God, then?"

No rapture. Just a smile, expanding across his face. "I meet a lot of articulate agnostics out here on the ranch, Katri," he jibed. "So no; I have a very un-Islamic idea. I think God is what we make of Him."

We went out back to the patio. My grandfather carried the telescope despite my attempts to help, and he set it up in the corner with the best view. He let me take the first look, straight at the unexplained God in the sky.

"Has it changed at all?" my grandfather asked.

I squinted through the lens. The light was as inscrutable as ever.

"I wonder what we look like from that far away," I said, pulling away. "If they could even see the light from our galaxy. Or maybe you could see the light from our universe. From the Big Bang." I shook my head to keep myself from shaking, but the shiver was gone in a moment anyway. "I wonder if the Big Bang looked like that."

My grandfather put his hand on my back, rubbing slow circles and meaningless patterns. "Think we'll find out what it is?"

"Give it twenty years," I answered. Two decades, and it would have filled the night sky or faded away. Or just sat there, letting the world learn how to deal with it.

"Hmm," my grandfather agreed.

We watched for a few more minutes in silence before he turned to go back inside. After a while, I followed him. The light stayed behind, waiting in the cold night sky. ○

# MOVEMENT

Nancy Fulda

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It is sunset. The sky is splendid through the panes of my bedroom window; billowing layers of cumulus blazing with refracted oranges and reds. I think if only it weren't for the glass, I could reach out and touch the cloudscape, perhaps leave my own trail of turbulence in the swirling patterns that will soon deepen to indigo.

But the window is there, and I feel trapped.

Behind me my parents and a specialist from the neurological research institute are sitting on folding chairs they've brought in from the kitchen, quietly discussing my future. They do not know I am listening. They think that, because I do not choose to respond, I do not notice they are there.

“Would there be side effects?” My father asks. In the oppressive heat of the evening, I hear the quiet *zzzap* of his shoulder laser as it targets mosquitoes. The device is not as effective as it was two years ago: the mosquitoes are getting faster.

My father is a believer in technology, and that is why he contacted the research institute. He wants to fix me. He is certain there is a way.

“There would be no side effects in the traditional sense,” the specialist says. I like him even though his presence makes me uncomfortable. He chooses his words very precisely. “We're talking about direct synaptic grafting, not drugs. The process is akin to bending a sapling to influence the shape of the grown tree. We boost the strength of key dendritic connections and allow brain development to continue naturally. Young neurons are very malleable.”

“And you've done this before?” I do not have to look to know my mother is frowning.

My mother does not trust technology. She has spent the last ten years trying to coax me into social behavior by gentler means. She loves me, but she does not understand me. She thinks I cannot be happy unless I am smiling and laughing and running along the beach with other teenagers.

“The procedure is still new, but our first subject was a young woman about the same age as your daughter. Afterward, she integrated wonderfully. She was never an exceptional student, but she began speaking more and had an easier time following classroom procedure.”

“What about Hannah's . . . talents?” my mother asks. I know she is thinking about my dancing; also the way I remember facts and numbers without trying. “Would she lose those?”

The specialist's voice is very firm, and I like the way he delivers the facts without

trying to cushion them. "It's a matter of trade-offs, Mrs. Didier. The brain cannot be optimized for everything at once. Without treatment, some children like Hannah develop into extraordinary individuals. They become famous, change the world, learn to integrate their abilities into the structures of society. But only a very few are that lucky. The others never learn to make friends, hold a job, or live outside of institutions."

"And . . . *with* treatment?"

"I cannot promise anything, but the chances are very good that Hannah will lead a normal life."

I have pressed my hand to the window. The glass feels cold and smooth beneath my palm. It appears motionless although I know at the molecular level it is flowing. Its atoms slide past each other slowly, so slowly; a transformation no less inevitable for its tempo. I like glass—also stone—because it does not change very quickly. I will be dead, and so will all of my relatives and their descendants, before the deformations will be visible without a microscope.

I feel my mother's hands on my shoulders. She has come up behind me and now she turns me so that I must either look in her eyes or pull away. I look in her eyes because I love her and because I am calm enough right now to handle it. She speaks softly and slowly.

"Would you like that, Hannah? Would you like to be more like other teenagers?"

Neither yes nor no seems appropriate, so I do not say anything. Words are such fleeting, indefinite things. They slip through the spaces between my thoughts and are lost.

She keeps looking at me, and I consider giving her an answer I've been saving. Two weeks ago she asked me whether I would like a new pair of dancing shoes and if so, what color. I have collected the proper words in my mind, smooth and firm like pebbles, but I decide it is not worth speaking them. Usually by the time I answer a question, people have forgotten that they asked it.

The word they have made for my condition is temporal autism. I do not like it, both because it is a word and because I am not certain I have anything in common with autists beyond a disinclination for speech.

They are right about the temporal part, though.

My mother waits twelve-point-five seconds before releasing my shoulders and returning to sit on the folding chair. I can tell she is unhappy with me, so I climb down from the window ledge and reach for the paper sack I keep tucked under my bed. The handles are made of twine, rough and real against my fingers. I press the sack to my chest and slip past the people conversing in my bedroom.

Downstairs I open the front door and stare into the breathtaking sky. I know I am not supposed to leave the house on my own, but I do not want to stay inside, either. Above me the heavens are moving. The clouds swirl like leaves in a hurricane: billowing, vanishing, tumbling apart and restructuring themselves; a lethargic yet incontrovertible chaos.

I can almost feel the Earth spinning beneath my feet. I am hurtling through space, a speck too small to resist the immensity of the forces that surround me. I tighten my fingers around the twine handles of the sack to keep myself from spinning away into the stratosphere. I wonder what it's like to be cheerfully oblivious of the way time shapes our existence. I wonder what it's like to be like everyone else.

I am under the brilliant sky now, the thick paper of the sack crackling as it swings against my legs. I am holding the handles so tightly that the twine bites into my fingers.

At my feet the flytraps are opening, their spiny blossoms stretching upward from chips and cracks in the pavement. They are a domestic variety gone wild, and they are thriving in the nurturing environment provided by this part of town. Our street hosts



a flurry of sidewalk cafes, and the fist-sized blossoms open every evening to snare crumbs of baguettes or sausage fragments carried by the wind from nearby tables.

The flytraps make me nervous, although I doubt I could communicate to anyone why this is so. They feel very much like the clouds that stream overhead in glowing shades of orange and amber: always changing, always taking on new forms.

The plants have even outgrown their own name. They seldom feed on flies anymore. The game of out-evolving prey has become unrewarding, and so they have learned to survive by seeming pleasant to humanity. The speckled patterns along the blossoms grow more intricate each year. The spines snap closed so dramatically when a bit of protein or carbohydrate falls within their grasp that children giggle and hasten to fetch more.

One flytrap, in particular, catches my attention. It has a magnificent blossom, larger and more colorful than any I have seen before, but the ordinary stem is too spindly to support this innovation. The blossom lies crushed against the sidewalk, overshadowed by the smaller, sturdier plants that crowd above it.

It is a critical juncture in the evolutionary chain, and I want to watch and see whether the plant will live to pass on its genes. Although the flytraps as a whole disquiet me, this single plant is comforting. It is like the space between one section of music and another; something is about to happen, but no one knows exactly what. The plant may quietly expire, or it may live to spawn the next generation of flytraps; a generation more uniquely suited to survival than any that has come before.

I want the flytrap to survive, but I can tell from the sickly color of its leaves that this is unlikely. I wonder, if the plant had been offered the certainty of mediocrity rather than the chance of greatness, would it have accepted?

I start walking again because I am afraid I will start crying.

I am too young. It is not fair to ask me to make such a decision. It is also not fair if someone else makes it for me.

I do not know what I should want.

The old cathedral, when it appears at the end of the avenue, soothes me. It is like a stone in the midst of a swirling river, worn smooth at the edges but mostly immune to time's capricious currents. Looking at it makes me think of Daniel Tammet. Tammet was an autistic savant in the twenty-first century who recognized every prime from 2 to 9,973 by the pebble-like quality they elicited in his mind. Historical architecture feels to me the way I think Tammet's primes must have felt to him.

The priest inside the building greets me kindly, but does not expect a response. He is used to me, and I am comfortable with him. He does not demand that I waste my effort on fleeting things—pointless things—like specks of conversation that are swept away by the great rush of time without leaving any lasting impact. I slip past him into the empty room where the colored windows cast shadows of light on the walls.

My footsteps echo as I pass through the doorway, and I feel suddenly alone.

I know that there are other people like me, most of them from the same ethnic background, which implies we are the result of a recent mutation. I have never asked to meet them. It has not seemed important. Now, as I sit against the dusty walls and remove my street shoes, I think maybe that has been a mistake.

The paper sack rustles as I pull from it a pair of dancing slippers. They are *pointe* shoes, reinforced for a type of dancing that human anatomy cannot achieve on its own. I slide my feet into position along the shank, my toes nestling into the familiar shape of the toe box. I wrap the ribbons carefully, making sure my foot is properly supported.

Other people do not see the shoes the same way I do. They see only the faded satin, battered so much that it has grown threadbare, and the rough wood of the toe box where it juts through the gaps. They do not see how the worn leather has matched it-

self to the shape of my foot. They do not know what it is like to dance in shoes that feel like a part of your body.

I begin to warm my muscles, keenly aware of the paths the shadows trace along the walls as sunset fades into darkness. When I have finished the last of my *pliés* and *jetés*, stars glimmer through the colored glass of the windows, dizzying me with their progress. I am hurtling through space, part of a solar system flung toward the outer rim of its galaxy. It is difficult to breathe.

Often, when the flow of time becomes too strong, I crawl into the dark space beneath my bed and run my fingers along the rough stones and jagged glass fragments that I have collected there. But today the *pointe* shoes are connecting me to the ground. I move to the center of the room, rise to full point . . .

And wait.

Time stretches and spins like molasses, pulling me in all directions at once. I am like the silence between one movement of music and the next, like a water droplet trapped halfway down a waterfall that stands frozen in time. Forces press against me, churning, swirling, roaring with the sound of reality changing. I hear my heart beating in the empty chamber. I wonder if this is how Daniel Tammet felt when he contemplated infinity.

Finally I find it; the pattern in the chaos. It is not music, precisely, but it is very like it. It unlocks the terror that has tightened my muscles and I am no longer a mote in a hurricane. I am the hurricane itself. My feet stir up dust along the floor. My body moves in accordance with my will. There are no words here. There is only me and the motion, whirling in patterns as complex as they are inconstant.

Life is not the only thing that evolves. My dancing changes every day, sometimes every second, each sequence repeating or vanishing based on how well it pleases me. At a higher level in the fractal, forms of dance also mutate and die. People call ballet a timeless art, but the dance performed in modern theaters is very different from the ballet that originally emerged in Italy and France.

Mine is an endangered species in the performance hierarchy; a neoclassical variant that no one remembers, no one pays to watch, and only a few small groups of dancers ever mimic. It is solitary, beautiful, and doomed to destruction. I love it because its fate is certain. Time has no more hold on it.

When my muscles lose their strength I will relinquish the illusion of control and return to being yet another particle in the rushing chaos of the universe, a spectator to my own existence. But for now I am aware of nothing except my own movement and the energy rushing through my blood vessels. Were it not for physical limitations, I would keep dancing forever.

My brother is the one who finds me. He has often brought me here and waits with electronics flickering at his temples while I dance. I like my brother. I feel comfortable with him because he does not expect me to be anything other than what I am.

By the time I have knelt to unlace my dance shoes my parents have arrived also. They are not calm and quiet like my brother. They are sweaty from the night air and speak in tense sentences that all jumble on top of each other. If they would bother to wait I might find words to soothe their frantic babble. But they do not know how to speak on my time scale. Their conversations are paced in seconds, sometimes in minutes. It is like the buzzing of mosquitoes in my ears. I need days, sometimes weeks to sort my thoughts and find the perfect answer.

My mother is close to my face and seems distressed. I try to calm her with the answer I've been saving.

"No new shoes," I say. "I couldn't dance the same in new shoes."

I can tell that these are not the words she was looking for, but she has stopped scolding me for leaving the house unaccompanied.

My father is also angry. Or perhaps he is afraid. His voice is too loud for me, and I tighten my fingers around the paper sack in my hands.

"Stars above, Hannah, do you have any idea how long we've been looking for you? Gina, we're going to have to do something soon. She might have wandered into the Red District, or been hit by a car, or—"

"I don't want to be rushed into this!" Mother's voice is angry. "Dr. Renoit is starting a new therapy group next month. We should—"

"I don't know why you're so stubborn about this. We're not talking about drugs or surgery. It's a simple, noninvasive procedure."

"One that hasn't been tested yet! We've been seeing progress with the ABA program. I'm not willing to throw that away just because . . ."

I hear the *zzzap* of father's shoulder laser. Because I have not heard the whine of a mosquito, I know that it has targeted a speck of dust. This does not surprise me. In the years since father bought the laser the mosquitoes have changed, but the dust is the same as it was millennia ago.

A moment later I hear Mother swear and swat at her shirt. The mosquito whizzes past my ear as it escapes. I have been keeping track of the statistics over the years. Mother's traditional approach to mosquitoes is no more effective than Father's hi-tech solution.

My brother takes me home while my parents argue about the future. I sit in his room while he lies down and activates the implants at his temples. Pinpricks of light gleam across his forehead, flickering because he's connected to the Vastness. His mind is wide, now. Wide and broadening; horizons without end. Each pulse of his neurons flares across the thoughtnets to stimulate the neurons of others, just as theirs are stimulating his.

Forty minutes later my grandparents pause by the open doorway. My grandparents do not understand the Vastness. They do not know that the drool pools at his cheek because it is hard to perceive the faint messages from the body when the mind is ablaze with stimuli. They see the slackness of his face, the glassy eyes staring upward, and they know only that he is far away from us, gone somewhere they cannot follow, and that they think must be evil.

"It isn't right," they mutter, "letting the mind decay like that. His parents shouldn't let him spend so much time on that thing."

"Remember how it was when we were young? The way we'd all crowd around the same game console? Everyone in the same room. Everyone seeing the same screen. Now that was bonding. That was healthy entertainment."

They shake their heads. "It's a shame young people don't know how to connect with each other anymore."

I do not want to listen to them talk, so I stand up and close the door in their faces. I know they will consider the action unprovoked, but I do not care. They know the words for temporal autism, but they do not understand what it means. Deep inside, they still believe that I am just bad mannered.

Faintly, beyond the door, I hear them telling each other how different young people are from the way they used to be. Their frustration mystifies me. I do not understand why old people expect the younger generations to hold still, why they think, in a world so full of tumult, children should play the same games their grandparents did.

I watch the lights flare at my brother's temples, a stochastic pattern that reminds me of the birth and death of suns. Right now, he is using a higher percentage of his neural tissue than anyone born a hundred years ago could conceive of. He is communicating with more people than my father has met in his entire lifetime.

How was it, I wonder, when *Homo habilis* first uttered the noises that would lead to modern language? Were those odd-sounding infants considered defective, asocial,

unsuitable to interact with their peers? How many genetic variations bordered on language before one found enough acceptance to perpetuate?

My grandparents say the Vastness is distorting my brother's mind, but I think it is really the opposite. His mind is built to seek out the Vastness, just like mine is attuned to the dizzying flow of seconds and centuries.

Night collides into morning, and somewhere along the way I fall asleep. When I wake, the sky beyond my brother's window is bright with sunlight. If I bring my face close to the glass, I can just see the flytrap with the magnificent blossom and the crumpled stem. It is too early to tell whether it will survive the day.

Outside the neighbors greet each other; the elderly with polite nods or handshakes, the teenagers with shouts and gestured slang. I wonder which of the new greetings used this morning will entrench themselves into the vocabulary of tomorrow.

Social structures follow their own path of evolution—variations infinitely emerging, competing, and fading into the tumult. The cathedral at the end of our street will one day host humans speaking a different language, with entirely different customs from ours.

Everything changes. Everything is always changing. To me, the process is very much like waves hitting the tidal rocks: Churn, swirl, splash, churn . . . Chaos, inevitable in its consistency.

It should not be surprising that, on the journey from what we are to what we are becoming, there should be friction and false starts along the way. Noise is intrinsic to change. Progression is inherently chaotic.

Mother calls me for breakfast, then attempts to make conversation while I eat my buttered toast. She thinks that I do not answer because I haven't heard her, or perhaps because I do not care. But it's not that. I'm like my brother when he's connected to the Vastness. How can I play the game of dredging up memorized answers to questions that have no meaning when the world is changing so rapidly? The heavens stream past outside the windows, the crustal plates are shifting beneath my feet. Everything around me is either growing or falling apart. Words feel flat and insignificant by comparison.

Mother and father have avoided discussing synaptic grafting with each other all morning, a clear indication that their communication strategies must once again evolve. Their conversations about me have always been strained. Disputed phrases have died out of our family vocabulary, and my parents must constantly invent new ones to fill the gaps.

I am evolving, too, in my own small way. Connections within my brain are forming, surviving, and perishing, and with each choice I make I alter the genotype of my soul. This is the thing, I think, that my parents most fail to see. I am not static, no more than the large glass window that lights the breakfast table. Day by day I am learning to mold myself to a world that does not welcome me.

I press my hands to the window and feel its cool smoothness beneath my skin. If I close my eyes I can almost feel the molecules shifting. Let it continue long enough, and the pane will someday find its own shape, one constrained not by the hand of humans but by the laws of the universe, and by its own nature.

I find that I have decided something.

I do not want to live small. I do not want to be like everyone else, ignorant of the great rush of time, trapped in frantic racing sentences. I want something else, something that I cannot find a word for.

I pull on Mother's arm and tap at the glass, to show her that I am fluid inside. As usual, she does not understand what I am trying to tell her. I would like to clarify, but I cannot find the way. I pull my ballet slippers from the rustling paper bag and place them on top of the information packet left by the neuroscientist.

"I do not want new shoes," I say. "I do not want new shoes." ○

# THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THE WORLD

Steve Bein

Steve Bein's fiction has appeared in *Writers of the Future*, *Asimov's*, and *Interzone*, and his translation of a Japanese classic on Zen philosophy, *Purifying Zen*, will be out in the summer. The author's latest story was inspired by an interview he heard with Steven Tyler, the lead singer of Aerosmith, who once forgot the lyrics for an entire album in the back seat of the taxi that took him to the studio to record the album. In the interview, Tyler described those lyrics as the most important thing in the world at that moment. Steve thinks Tyler might have had it wrong.

**E**rnie Sisco knows what the most important thing in the world is. It took him a long time to figure it out, but he knows what it is now. He knows because somebody forgot it in the back of his cab.

Ernie's been driving cabs thirty-two years now, and in that time he's seen people leave all kinds of things behind. Crazy things, things he'd never have believed somebody could forget in a taxi. Wallets and purses are commonplace. So are asthma inhalers, epi-pens, medications the fare's literally going to die without. Once a fare actually left her baby in the back seat, a ten-month-old in one of those tan Graco baby carriers. The kid was sleeping right behind Ernie's seat, right where he couldn't see her, and he'd gone on a good half a mile before he had to pull over to take a leak. Good thing for the fare, too. When he drove back she was crying her eyes out on the street corner, too scared to tell anyone what she'd done.

Sometimes people will say their kids are the most important thing in the world, but Ernie doesn't think that's right. In any case, the ten-month-old wasn't what helped him figure it out. What sent him in the right direction was folded up in a silver Samsonite carry-on.

Ernie picks up the fare at Logan, a skinny white kid, the type that doesn't surprise a guy when they tell him to drive to Harvard. The kid's got two bags, matching hard cases the color that car companies call Lunar Mist or Ingot Silver Metallic.

Ernie puts the big one in the trunk. The kid insists on keeping the carry-on with him in the back seat. "Plenty of room," Ernie says, but the kid says whatever's in the case is too important to risk getting rear-ended. It's obvious the kid doesn't think much of Ernie's driving, but Ernie shrugs it off and starts the meter running.

They get to the Yard and figure out where the kid's conference is going to meet. It's on theoretical physics or temporal physics or something like that. Ernie took physics in high school, but that was a million years ago and he was never any good at it anyway. He was never the math-science type; Ernie's more of a reader. Look under the driver's seat and you'll find yellowed copies of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Ernie doesn't know anything about motorcycles, Zen, or the Spanish Civil War; he's just got a thing for fiction that leans toward autobiography, and lately he's been boning up on American authors.

A lot of Harvard types don't tend to think much of Ernie. They see a chunky bald guy behind the wheel of a cab and they make certain assumptions. But Ernie's no dope. He's got a cushy job where he can sit and read all day if he wants to. Park it on the corner of Brattle and James and he can spend all afternoon reading without getting a call. Some might call it lazy—in fact, there's one in particular who calls it lazy every chance she gets—but Ernie can read the same great books as all the other Harvard types and he can do it without dropping any thirty or forty grand a year.

Ernie drops the kid off on Kirkland and sure enough the kid forgets the little Samsonite in the back. The campus has that effect on first-timers. It's beautiful, especially on a bright summer day: all green leaves and red brick and bright white-washed windows. And there's the whole reputation thing too. Thinking about how they're going to impress all the muckety-mucks has a way of leaving people a little scatterbrained. Sometimes they ignore guys like Ernie completely, and then they go walking off toward the nearest red brick building without leaving a tip and without remembering to check the back seat.

Ernie forgets all about it too, and doesn't hear the case clunking around back there until he's in the line at Fenway in the top of the ninth. There's big business at Fenway, a lot of fares, and they usually tip pretty well when the Sox win. The boys are up six-nothing when Ernie pulls up, so he stows the kid's carry-on in the trunk and figures he'll drop it off the next time a fare takes him out that way.

One of the buckles comes undone when he drops the case in the trunk and curiosity gets the better of Ernie. He takes a peek.

Inside there's this funny-looking suit, a bit like a wetsuit but with copper wires running all over the outside. The fabric smells strongly of neoprene. It's the same shade of blue the Royals wear, and with the hood and goggles it looks like something you'd wear if you wanted to get in a fistfight with Spider-Man. On the chest there's a steel box with a little readout screen and what looks like a phone keypad.

That's as good a look as Ernie gets before the roar goes up in Fenway. It sounds like a third out pop fly. Ernie's back on. By the time he's done running Fenway fares he's hungry, and by the time he finishes a brat and a soft pretzel he's sick of working so he heads home. It's not until he's a beer down and watching Sox highlights on ESPN that he remembers the funny-looking suit.

His first thought when he gets it laid out on his sofa is that he's going to have a hell of a time fitting into it. Thirty-some years sitting behind the wheel of a cab hasn't done much for his physique. But he's just got to try it on. Whatever it is, the kid said it was too important to risk damaging. He's careful with it, but he's got to know what it is.

The boots are too big and the arms are too long, and it's all Ernie can do to suck in his gut enough to get the front zipped. The stink of neoprene overpowers even the legions of cigarettes Ernie and Janine have smoked in this room. The stainless steel



box hangs around his neck the way tourists hang their big black cameras, fixed to a sling of webbing, and on top of the box is that little readout screen. It's about impossible to read the numbers on it unless he's wearing the goggles, and as soon as he puts the goggles on he learns the big plastic rings around them house a bunch of ultra-bright LEDs. The goggles shift everything he sees toward the yellow-orange part of the spectrum, kind of like ski goggles, and the LEDs spotlight everything he looks at.

The readout screen on the chest unit is actually two screens. On the left you can set the date and time and the right side seems to work like a kitchen timer. The date and time are way off: six o'clock in the morning on March 13th, *the year after next*. Ernie sets it right, which for him means five minutes fast. Janine used to yell at him all the time for being late, and though he'll be the first to admit she didn't fix everything she says is wrong with him, at least he's never late anymore.

Next he looks at the kitchen timer. By now he's sweating his balls off even in the air conditioning, but he's damned if he's taking off this ridiculous suit before he figures out what it does. He sets the timer for two minutes and hits Start.

The world stops. The ESPN guy, in the midst of saying something about the Cubs, freezes coming from the "ah" of "Chicago" and just keeps saying "aaaaaah." There's a steady drone coming from the air conditioner, not the usual back and forth rattle but a constant monotone. The thin ribbon of smoke snaking up from Ernie's ashtray stops dead and just hangs there.

"Weird," Ernie's about to say, but saying this is weird is like saying Ted Williams could hit a little bit, so Ernie doesn't bother. Apart from him, the only things moving in the whole house are the numbers counting down on the kitchen timer. Even the air feels like it's stuck in place. Ernie's got to suck it in like a milkshake through a straw. Standing up is hard and walking is like pushing through chest-deep water.

There's a compression left in the couch cushion where he was sitting a second ago, still squished down though there's no big cabbie ass to squish it. He wades over to the ashtray and touches the cigarette smoke with a gloved finger. It doesn't move under a light touch, but a little nudge frees it up somehow and the part he touched starts its slow crawl toward the ceiling. The rest just hangs there like a question mark made of white cotton candy.

He fiddles with other stuff for a minute or two. Everything he tries to pick up feels like it's glued down, but he can budge it if he muscles it. The TV remote doesn't do anything, though; it's still just whatshisname saying "aaaaah" with a not-so-bright look on his face.

The kitchen holds the best surprises. That brat he picked up for dinner wasn't doing the trick, so before he turned on the TV and cracked open that beer he put a pot on for spaghetti. When he gets to the kitchen, the flames under the pot look like they've been airbrushed there. They don't move a bit. The water looks like it's boiling and frozen at the same time, the bubbles stock-still, a big one half-popped on the surface and looking like a crater.

Then *bam*, the world starts moving again. Bubbles bubble. Flames flicker. The couch cushion springs up from the ass print he left on it. The ESPN guy finally finishes whatever he was going to say about the Cubs. Ernie looks down at the box on his chest and he sees the timer's at zero.

Ernie dumps some angel hair in the pot, then sits in front of the air conditioner and sweats, trying to figure out what the hell just happened. In the four and a half minutes it takes the angel hair to cook, he comes up with nothing. He goes back to the kitchen, grabs a black pasta spoon, and hooks a noodle to taste it. They're perfect. Then the world gets funny again.

One second he's holding the cheap plastic spoon over the pot. The next he's holding a hot drooping handle and there's spatters of black plastic all over the stovetop.



The business end of the spoon is bumping around in the pot, half an inch of melted handle curling down from one side like a tail.

To beat that, his angel hair's gone from *al dente* to mush. He finds that out after he drains it and fishes out what's left of his spoon. Right about then is when he sees the red light blinking on the answering machine. Ernie's old school. He has an answering machine, a big brown and black one, and despite the fact that there were no messages on it when he got home, now there is one and he never heard the phone ring.

He plays the message. It's Janine. She says she's coming over in a few minutes. According to the time stamp she left the message while he was standing five feet from the phone, watching his angel hair and his pasta spoon turn to garbage in something like a millionth of a second.

Then it hits him. She's coming over in a few minutes. He's dressed to go scuba diving with Buck Rogers.

He struggles out of the suit, which is no easier getting out of than in. He's in his boxers, shirtless and sweating like a dockworker, when he hears her key slide into the lock. He stuffs the blue suit behind the couch and gets turned back around just in time not to look suspicious. And desperate. He hopes.

She takes one look at him and says, "Jesus, Ernie."

Janine's the type of woman you can tell was beautiful once. The tanning she did when they were in their twenties isn't so easy to wear anymore, but hot damn was she a looker back then. Gravity hasn't been so kind to what used to draw long looks from every guy on the street, but back then every last one of them was wishing he was Ernie. She's not what she used to be, but to Ernie she's still Rita Hayworth.

He's not even sure he realized that himself, not even just the night before, when the yelling got bad and she slammed the door on her way out. Now, after the day he's been having, it feels damn good to have her in the house again.

"You're letting yourself go," she says.

"Just getting changed," he says. "Long day at work."

"If it was a long day at work," she says, "you'd still be out working. You knock off after the game again today?"

"Again with the game," he says, wishing he could take it back the second it leaves his mouth. "Look, they tip good over there," he says. "I don't have to work a full eight hours on game days."

"I'll worry about eight after you put in six," she says. "I just came for some clothes."

Ernie follows her to the bedroom and sweeps yesterday's jeans off the end of the unmade bed. "You want to stay for dinner?" he says.

She doesn't answer. She doesn't need to.

She rolls an armful of bras and underwear in a T-shirt and drapes another shirt and a pair of jeans on top. Ernie asks her if she's staying at her sister's again tonight. She says yes. On her way back to the door, she says, "Christ, Ernie, did you steal something from a fare?"

"No," he says—maybe a second too soon. It's been a point of pride for him. You wouldn't believe how many cabbies figure a fare leaves something in the cab, that means they must not want it that bad. It's been a point of pride for Janine, too. She always said he was better than those other guys.

She gives him a cold look and says, "Where's that suitcase from, then?"

The silver Samsonite's sitting right there on the couch. He only has to look at it for a second before he answers. "It's for you," he says. "I figured maybe you'd need it to get your stuff."

Her eyes get colder. "Bull," she says. "You're telling me you're making it *easier* for me to get out of here?"

"No," he says. "I'm making it easier for you to come back."

It softens her for a second. She puts her stuff in the suitcase. He invites her again to stay for dinner. "You put in a full day's work and maybe I'll stay," she says. Then she walks out.

He stays up late thinking about things—about Janine, about the suit and the timer on it—and before he knows it, it's nine in the morning and the snooze on his alarm clock's been yelling at him for over an hour. Some cabbies have to drive when the company tells them to, but Ernie owns his own car so he drives when he wants. That's part of the problem with Janine.

By the time he fell asleep, he'd managed to convince himself things weren't so bad. He didn't steal the suit from that kid. Right from the beginning he meant to give it back. He just forgot. And things with Janine weren't as bad as they could've been. She was pissed, sure, but she still had her ring on. She never did get pissed off the way Ernie does. She stores everything up, lets it build, and it takes just as long for her to bleed the pressure off. Ernie, he's more the firecracker type. Short fuse, short burst, then back to peace and quiet.

But he figures she meant it when she said she'd stay for dinner. Too bad that's not going to happen anymore. It's too late to get a full day's worth of fares and be home by dinnertime. He missed the morning rush and the Sox are on the road. But before he nodded off he got himself an idea about the suit. He told himself he wasn't going to go through with it, but that was before he slept through the morning rush. Now the more he thinks about it, the more he figures there isn't another way. Before he tries it, though, he's got to try an experiment.

He sets up the suit exactly the same way he did the night before—two minutes on the timer, the clock set five minutes fast—only this time he doesn't put the suit on. He holds the suit up over his head and gives it a little upward toss as he hits Start on the timer.

The suit's on the ground without falling there. He's looking at it overhead and then it's on his feet. He never sees it fall. He'd have said this is pretty weird, but the weirdest part is this is exactly what he thought would happen.

He's got five minutes to wait before the next part of the experiment, and during that time he learns five minutes is way too long to think about whether being near this suit is going to give him cancer or something. For all he knows, the suit's radioactive. For all he knows, he ought to be wearing a lead jockstrap.

At the end of the five minutes, he pokes and prods at the suit with a big stubby toe. He can't move it. He kicks it. Can't even ruffle the neoprene. A harder kick and all he does is hurt his foot.

Just for grins he pours a glass of water on the suit. The water looks like it slides off the suit without ever touching it. Not like rain on a waxed car, where it beads up on the wax; it's as if the suit's not wet because the water can't touch it at all. There's a dark spot in Ernie's orange shag carpeting and not a drop on the neoprene. For two minutes nothing he can do affects the suit.

By this time he figures he's got a pretty good idea of what this suit is and what it does. He can't even begin to imagine how it's possible, but at this point he can't afford to care. This little jewel is the end of all his worries. Never mind a full day's pay; what he needs is for Janine to take him back, and with this thing he can get her back for good.

He stuffs the suit in an old duffel bag and heads downtown. He doesn't turn his lights on, doesn't roll by the hospital or the Huntington Avenue hotels to see if there's a fare, doesn't even bother calling in to dispatch. Whatever he'd make from fares isn't squat compared to what the suit can do for him.

Ernie parks at the first 7-Eleven he sees, grabs the duffel bag, and asks the old guy behind the counter if he can use the john. In the bathroom he changes into the suit, sets the clock one hour fast, and sets the timer for ten minutes. Then he punches Start.

It's hard to breathe again and opening the door feels like he's pulling it through water. He finally manages to get it open, though, and outside the whole store's frozen. The second hand on the clock isn't moving. The little hot dog rollers don't roll. The hot dogs don't even blister under the heat lamps.

It feels like wading as he makes his way to the cash register. There's a little portable radio on behind the counter; he can't tell what it's playing because there's just the one note coming from it, like someone leaning on a car horn. The old guy is staring at the chest of a busty eighteen-year-old buying *Cosmo* and cigarettes. Her eyes are fixed in mid-blink, her teeth at half-chew on her gum. Their hands are stone still above the counter, her change in mid-slide from his hand to hers. The till is open.

It's hard to pull up the black plastic drawer, and not just because it's stuck there like glue: Ernie doesn't know if bumping into the old guy will be like nudging the smoke, freeing him, so he's got to be careful not to touch him. It takes him about a minute to lift the drawer. One minute to make a solid day's worth of fares. It wouldn't be too hard to pick up the hundred dollar bills if he could use his fingernails, but they're gloved under an eighth of an inch of blue neoprene and so he needs to use the edge of a quarter to pry them up. He takes all three, and the fifty too, and leaves the checks.

He leaves the rest of the cash too. No point in bankrupting the place. Nor does he go after the white Coach purse hanging from the girl's shoulder. He's got nothing against her. Nothing against the old guy or 7-Eleven either. It's just that he's got to get his wife back and this is the only way he can see to do it.

He heads to the bathroom, drags the door open, and grabs his duffel bag. The timer on his chest says he's got four more minutes. It takes him a little over a minute to open one of the cooler doors and pry a can of Dr. Pepper off the shelf. Another minute to wade over to the front door of the store. Half a second to realize that leaving now would mean that apart from the teenage girl and the old cashier, the only person the security camera's going to show is a chubby balding white guy who walked into the men's room and never came out. He wades back to the john, he locks himself in, and he waits.

When the timer hits zero, he unzips the suit and crams it back in the duffel. By the time he gets out of the bathroom, the girl's gone and the old man still doesn't have the slightest clue what happened. And why would he? He hasn't opened the drawer again yet.

The clock on the dash said it was eleven o'clock on the dot when he parked the cab in front of the store. When he starts her up again, it says eleven-oh-four. Still plenty of time.

On the way home he stops by a J.C. Penney and buys a small silver Samsonite just like the one he gave Janine the night before. He tucks the receipt in his wallet, and when he gets home he stows the carry-on with all the rest of the crap he's got piled up under the basement stairs. Then he waits.

Just before noon, he makes sure to be sitting right in front of his alarm clock. He waits for it to hit. He's sitting on the edge of the bed looking at the big red digits telling him it's 11:59. He blinks.

When his eyes open it's 12:10.

He didn't fall asleep. He knows he didn't. The time just passed, like a movie he didn't buy a ticket to. He hits the streets again with the suit in his duffel.

It turns out he got lucky at the 7-Eleven. The next men's room he uses is at a gas station, and when he gets to the cash register the drawer's closed and nothing he

can do can make it open. He figures he'll make the best of it, so he goes outside and tries to fill up on gas. He can pull the nozzle loose and force it into the mouth of his gas tank, but squeezing the handle doesn't do a thing. It isn't like the Dr. Pepper, where prying loose the can pries loose everything inside it. The gas is separate from the nozzle, and it's all still frozen in that big reservoir under the pavement.

It's a senseless waste of ten free minutes. He tries again at a Dunkin Donuts with the same results. The next time he wises up and hits a really busy gas station. He figures the way to boost his odds is to find a place where the drawer's going to be open a lot.

The till's got five hundred and thirty bucks in it, counting just the big bills, twenties and up. He leaves the rest of the cash; these people have to eat too, and Ernie really isn't a bad guy. Taking out what he paid for the luggage, he's close to seven hundred for the day. Not bad. Not bad at all.

This time when he gets out of the john, the cashier's losing it. She knows the cash is gone but she doesn't know how. Ernie practically has a heart attack when she threatens to lock the whole store and call the cops. Breathing is so hard while he's wearing the suit that he's already feeling like he ran the Boston Marathon. Having her freak out isn't any help.

But Ernie's luck is still holding: there's a pair of young black men by the magazine rack in Charlestown High football jackets. Society is what it is, and that means nobody in this town is going to suspect a middle-aged, out of shape white guy of robbing a gas station when they've got two black guys right there in Bloods colors.

Ernie gets the hell out of there ASAP. Those boys aren't going to see jail time for this. There's no evidence against them. That's what Ernie tells himself, anyway, and he's almost certainly right. And, he tells himself, there's not much point in taking fares today, so he goes home and cracks open some James Ellroy and waits for the call from Janine.

She's not happy.

She doesn't even bother calling. She just comes over. "Where you been?" she says. Not even a hello.

"I been working," says Ernie, and he shows her a fat wad of bills. "I had a great day."

He tells her a story about a couple of French businessmen he picked up at Logan, how they didn't really get the whole tipping thing and how even though he tried to talk them out of it, they left him a hundred bucks each. "Bullshit," she says.

"Your dispatcher called me," she says, "trying to get a hold of you. They say some kid's been calling every ten minutes wondering if anyone's turned in a bag he left in his cab. Silver carry-on. Sound familiar?"

"Hey, yeah," says Ernie. "Kind of like the bag I bought you, huh?"

"Just like it," she says. "Don't you dare try to talk your way out of this."

He doesn't. He shows her the receipt from his wallet, with most of the date eaten up by a convenient Dr. Pepper stain.

"You're up to something," she says. "Your dispatcher said you hadn't logged in all day. Now you got two days' worth of tips. What's going on?"

"Nothing," he says. He's been making the airport run all day, he says, so what's the point of calling dispatch? Janine doesn't buy it. He tries to talk her into dinner. She's not buying that either.

"Come on," he says. "You said if I had the money, you'd stay."

"It's not about the money," she says. "It's about reliability. It's about me not having to pick up extra shifts at the last minute to make sure the bills get paid. Good night, Ernie."

"G'night." There's nothing else to say.

\* \* \*

It takes him an hour to realize he's got nothing else going that night, and with all the stuff with Janine he knows he isn't getting to sleep any time soon. He heads out to the cab and calls in to take a couple of fares. Roberta at dispatch asks him where he's been all day. Ernie says thanks a lot and tells her to go screw herself.

One of his fares takes him within half a mile of Harvard Yard. He can't help thinking about that kid. He rolls down Mass Ave but the Yard's dark and empty, the way it usually is when school's out. Then he see a dozen people walking past Memorial Church. Most of them look Indian or Chinese, but there's one tall skinny white guy straggling at the back. It's the kid who forgot the suit.

He slides into a parking space half a block down and leaves her running, his eye fixed on the rear view. Soon enough he catches sight of the Indians and Chinese and the skinny kid again. They turn down Dunster and Ernie figures he knows where they're headed. He turns off the car, feeds the meter, and makes for the Brew House.

John Harvard's Brew House is just the sort of place you go if you're a tourist who just got done with a conference at Harvard. It's close, it's popular, and it's got that ambience the tourists go for. It is not, therefore, a good place to sit by yourself and drown your sorrows. By the time Ernie gets inside, the Indians and Chinese are talking loudly in the corner, boisterous and drinking like tourists. The skinny kid's by himself at the bar, hunched over a beer like he's whispering secrets to it.

He's the kind of skinny Ernie only ever sees in pictures of foreigners, like East African refugees, or the Jews in Auschwitz. He's the kind of skinny that makes you stare. Ernie tries not to.

The kid finishes his beer and orders another. Ernie sits down two stools away and orders a Summer Blonde. They sit there a few minutes, quiet. The kid looks up at Ernie and his eyes are red around the edges. They have a kind of light to them. Cruel, Ernie wants to call it. Cold. But as soon as he thinks he sees it, it's gone, and everything in the kid's face tells Ernie he doesn't recognize him at all. That's good.

Ernie asks him how he's doing. Fine, he says. "You don't look it," Ernie says. "Hope you don't mind me saying so, but you look more stressed out than I ever been in my life, and I been held up twice. Once at gunpoint, once at knifepoint. Even then I wasn't as stressed as you."

"Yeah," the kid says, "well, the last couple of days have been pretty rough." He knocks back the last half of his drink in one gulp.

Ernie orders him another. "Whatsa matter?" he says. "Lose your job or something?"

"You could say that," he says. "My job, my fellowship, my future. Maybe my wife. I don't know."

"Come on," says Ernie. "It can't be that bad. You're young and full of beans. You got your whole life ahead of you."

He gives Ernie disdainful look. "Platitudes and beer?" he says. "That's what I need to solve all my problems? Maybe we'll do a cliché chaser after this."

"Hey, sorry," Ernie says. "Just trying to help. The point I was gonna make is, whatever's wrong, you got plenty of time to fix it. You're smart, you're young . . . how old are you anyway?"

"That depends on how you look at it," says the kid. Ernie gives him a funny look and the kid changes his answer right away. "Twenty-nine," he says.

"There you go," Ernie tells him. "Plenty of time."

"Mister," says the kid, "no offense, but I know a lot more about time than you ever will."

That's the hook Ernie needs. Years ago, it used to be that people talked to their cabbies. These days they're in the back on their iPods or cell phones or whatever, but for a good twenty years a big part of Ernie's job was making chitchat. He's still good

enough at it that he can prod the kid in the right direction. Now that he's got him talking about time, he keeps him there.

At first Ernie's only pretending to be interested, but actually the kid's got some pretty neat stuff to say. Once Ernie gets him talking about his research at school, it's hard to shut the kid up long enough to order another round. The truth is, Ernie can't follow half of what the kid's telling him. He's been meaning to put Hawking and Greene and Tyson on his reading list for years; now he's wishing he'd gotten around to it. His favorite used book store is right across the square and Ernie's half-wishing they were still open so he could run over there and do some digging.

But they're not, so he can't, and at any rate he needs to concentrate a hundred percent on what the kid's telling him. It turns out the kid is some kind of physics genius. Ernie never went to college—to him it always seemed like too much work for too little reward—but he knows enough to know you have to be some kind of genius to be finishing a double doctorate by twenty-nine.

Even if most of what the kid says is over his head, Ernie comes to understand they didn't start with a suit. The first experiments worked with lumps of some kind of radioactive material Ernie thinks he remembers hearing of once. Cesium, it's called. Ernie's pretty sure cesium's in the periodic table but he's not positive. The kid explained how you can use whatever these lumps give off to measure the passage of time—something about half-lives and atomic clocks and a bunch of other stuff Ernie hasn't thought about since high school.

But Ernie understands the long and short of it well enough. The bottom line is, the kid and his professor at school found a way to make these lumps spend some of their own future in the present.

"No way," Ernie tells him. "That's impossible."

"It's not," says the kid, and he buries Ernie under a lot more stuff there's no way he'd have been able to follow if he hadn't seen the suit do its thing. It all had to do with "four dimensional space-time" and thinking of time as cause and effect, and what is cause and effect except the transfer of energy? By the time Ernie's ass leaves the bar stool he'll have forgotten almost all of this, but he'll remember that question because the kid poses it to him about a hundred times.

Over the next hour Ernie wraps his lightly liquored brain around the idea that we've been storing energy and converting it and moving it around for a long time, and that if causality is a kind of energy then if you understand it right you can basically move cause and effect. Ernie tries to sum it up like this: "So what you're saying is, you're majoring in time travel."

"It's not time travel," says the kid. "It's more like borrowing time. Think of it as taking a link from a chain and inserting it earlier in the chain."

He finishes his beer and Ernie signals the girl behind the bar for another round. The kid's a lightweight drinking-wise, but Ernie has to admit he's pretty damn smart even this many beers down. Ernie's a couple behind him and he's only an inch away from just plain lost.

The kid says, "Never mind the chain," and he goes back to the radioactive lumps. Eventually he gets Ernie to see the big picture. You take two of these lumps, the exact same size, and you pop one of them in a machine that does what the suit does. You set the machine to borrow an hour from one o'clock that afternoon. You turn the machine on and *bam*, lump one—the one in the machine—is smaller than lump two. Then, at one o'clock, all of a sudden lump one isn't radioactive anymore. It stays that way for an hour, not radioactive and not shrinking. Then, by two o'clock, both lumps are radioactive again and both of 'em are back to the exact same size.

It's weird stuff. And Ted Williams could hit a little bit.

Ernie would have said the kid was full of crap if he hadn't been doing that very

experiment all afternoon. "So what's the point?" he says. "Give a hammer and chisel and I figure I could make your lump smaller for you. I wouldn't need two hours and a college degree, neither."

"What's the point?" asks the kid, and he squints at Ernie like Ernie just asked him which one's worth more, a nickel or a hundred dollar bill. "We didn't limit the experiments to lumps of cesium," he says. "We built a bodysuit," he says, and he tells Ernie all about it.

Ernie gets it. He gets it just fine. The suit is free money. It's the ultimate blank check. According to the kid, the college types invented it to see if something that borrowed time from its own future could pull other things into its time-stream, but Ernie's got bigger fish to fry. And he's got bigger questions too, but he can't ask them flat out without tipping the kid off that he has the suit. So he sits. And he listens. And he waits.

When the kid's done, Ernie says, "Sounds like you're living the dream, sport. You and your prof went and invented the ring of Gyges."

"What do you mean?" says the kid.

Ernie rolls his eyes, wondering what they're teaching kids in college these days. He says, "In the suit you can do whatever you want, right? And nobody can do anything about it, right? 'Cause you're the only time traveler? My friend, what you got is action without consequences. You got the ultimate get out of jail free card."

"It's not free," the kid says. "And the consequences are far too high."

Ernie's finally got him where he wants him. "What're the consequences?" he says. "What's the downside to this time traveling of yours?"

"It isn't time travel," says the kid. "And it isn't free. This is borrowing time. Take it from me: if you do it enough, you'll destroy your life."

Ernie's balls shrink up into his gut. He knew it. He just knew it. There had to be a downside. Cancer. Something. But he can't let any of that show on his face. Instead he says, "What do you mean? You don't look dead to me."

"Not yet," the kid says, "but I'm living on borrowed time." He laughs at himself and drains his beer. They've had four together so far. Ernie orders another round.

"My life isn't my own anymore," the kid tells him. "My daughter was born the day after I defended my second proposal. Seeta Marie. My wife's family's Indian. Beautiful, beautiful girl." He stops to take another drink. "I had a brand new baby," he says, "two dissertations to write, and only a year before my grant money ran out. Do you know what kind of pressure that is? No. Of course you don't. A year wasn't enough. I needed more time."

That look comes back in his eyes. "I put on the device," he says. "Every night, as soon as Lakshmi and Seeta were asleep, I set it for eight hours. At first I was planning to use the time to write, but my computer wouldn't work. I could dislodge the keys into my time-stream but not the electrons in the wires. So I wrote during the day and used my extra eight hours a night to read. I finished my thesis on Poincaré's special relativity in ten months flat. I'm halfway through the second one now."

"Let me get this straight," says Ernie. "You been doing this every night?"

"I've been living thirty-two hour days for over a year," the kid tells him.

"Jesus," says Ernie. "No wonder you look tired. How much you borrowed so far?"

"Eight hours a night for a year is just short of a hundred and twenty-two days," says the kid. He chuckles into his mug. "I'd be in the hundred and fifty range by now if it weren't for the interest."

Ernie doesn't get it, and says so.

"It was a recent discovery," the kid says. "Six weeks ago we tried stopwatches instead of cesium samples, to make the results of the experiments more easily understandable to lay people. For funding, you see. It never even occurred to us that radioactivity would have anything to do with the time lending process."



Ernie gulps. Cancer. The suit's radioactive after all. Then he figures out the kid's talking about the cesium. Even with that realization, he still wants to grab his nuts to make sure they're still there.

"Borrow a minute from a stopwatch's future," the kid says, "and you get it back just over a minute fast. We haven't yet figured out why. My advisor thinks it has something to do with the mass—the cesium was always lighter when it paid back its time—but I think it's more to do with the radioactivity itself. At any rate, the discrepancy magnifies exponentially as you increase the time borrowed. Borrow an hour and it comes back almost sixty-six minutes fast."

"How about borrowing eight hours?" asks Ernie.

"Nine hundred and fifty-odd minutes," the kid says. "When it comes time, I'll pay back nearly sixteen hours for every eight I've borrowed." He finishes his drink and Ernie keeps 'em coming. "My driver's license says I'm twenty-nine," he says. "Chronologically, my body is approaching its thirty-first birthday."

Ernie's thinking, Cry me a river. Here he is, fifty-three and staring down the barrel of a divorce, and this kid's bitching about thirty-one.

But Ernie doesn't say any of that. He asks him where he's getting the time from. "Next summer," says the kid, and just saying it makes him come damn close to puking.

"What's gonna happen to you?" says Ernie.

"I had it all planned," the kid says, and the words start tumbling out like they're tripping over each other to get out of his mouth. "It was going to happen in the summer," he says. "I was going to slip out of time. Secure a post-doc, find a little cabin in the woods, and just slip out. Now," he says, "now . . ." and all the rest is gibberish.

"Come on," Ernie tells him, "hold it together. What's gonna happen to you?"

"I'm going to slip out of time," says the kid. His eyes are rimmed with red; he's halfway ready to cry. Ernie can't stand seeing a grown man cry. "When it hits," the kid says, "when I get to the point I've been borrowing from, I'm just going to freeze. However I'm sitting right then, I'll just sit that way. From May 15th next year until the following March."

"What," Ernie says, "like being in a coma?"

The kid shakes his head. Getting him back to talking about the science seems to sober him up a bit. "I won't feel any time pass," he says. "For everyone else, I'll be like a statue. My heart won't beat. I won't breathe. If they try to resuscitate me, they'll fail. If my eyes are open, no one will understand why they don't dry out."

"Jesus," says Ernie. "You could wake up in a coffin."

The kid nods and says, "I've thought of that. I'll have to make it clear I want to be cremated."

Ernie coughs up a mouthful of beer. "What are you, nuts?" he says. "You want to wake up burnt to a crisp?"

"You forget," says the kid, "burning is a kind of change. Change can only take place over time, and I'll have spent that time by then. When you're borrowing time, dislodging something from its own time-stream into yours is difficult but it's possible. Once you've borrowed the time, though, you've spent it; if you were to experience change *then*, that would be *real* time travel."

"So nothing bad can happen to you," says Ernie.

The kid gives him that sullen, cold-eyed stare again. "Suppose the first one to find me is my daughter," he says. "She'll be almost two years old. Her father will be worse than comatose. He'll be a zombie. A vampire."

"Nah," says Ernie. "You'll explain it to her. Your wife'll explain it. You got a year yet, right?"

"Then suppose I'm not at home," he says. "What if when it happens I'm someplace where nobody knows me? Or what if I'm driving? If I'm in traffic when it hits me, I could kill someone."

"Nah," Ernie says again. "You're a smart kid. You won't let that happen. I bet you already got a backup plan."

"You want to hear my plan?" says the kid. He makes a face like he's gonna puke again. He says, "The big plan was to lock up a post-doc my advisor says I'm in the running for. He says our experiments make me a shoo-in. I secure the fellowship for next year's fall semester. I take a summer vacation 'to write'—he gives Ernie the air quotes—"and find myself a cabin in the woods somewhere. I slip out of time for the summer, come back mid-October, and throw something together to satisfy the post-doc people in between mailing out resumes and applying for jobs."

Ernie shrugs. It sounds like a good plan.

"Don't you get it?" says the kid. "That was when I thought I'd be out for five months. With the discrepancy, do you know how much time I've got to pay back?"

"I'm guessing it's not five months," says Ernie.

The kid's voice gets sharp and cold. "If I stop borrowing today," he says, "I'm looking at three hundred and one days, fourteen hours, fifty-two minutes." The numbers roll off his tongue as easily as his Social Security number. Ernie wonders how long he's spent dwelling on this. "By the time I come back," the kid says, "the best jobs will be gone. My fellowship deadline will be blown and I'll have nothing to give them. Nothing. I'll miss Christmas with Seeta. At her age she's not even going to remember who I am. Her dad's going to disappear on her for almost a year with nothing to show for it. Christ, what am I going to do?"

He's practically crying now and it makes Ernie squirm in his seat. "Kid," he tells him, "believe me when I tell you this: if that's the worst this suit can do to you, you're no different from the rest of us. Here I been thinking you're gonna tell me the suit'll give you a heart attack. Seriously, kid, nothing bad can happen to you while you're slipped out of time? No cancer or nothing?"

"I'll answer that," he says, "just as soon as you give it back."

Ernie chokes on his beer and sputters. Then he puts on the most innocent face he can and asks him what he's talking about.

All the kid's emotion has drained out onto the floor. "Face it," he says, "cab drivers don't usually go out to bars to discuss temporal physics."

Wicked smart, this kid. Ernie's looking at his shirt, his jacket, his hands, wondering what the kid saw that gave him away. He can't figure it out so he asks, "How'd you know I was a cabbie?"

"You drove me from the airport," says the kid.

Ernie says he thought the kid didn't recognize him. "I know," says the kid. "That's what you were supposed to think. Now, do you have the device with you, or are we going back to your place?"

As the kid gets in the back seat, Ernie says, "So seriously, there's got to be risks. Doesn't there? To using the suit?"

"As if living on borrowed time isn't bad enough," says the kid. "As if lying to my wife every night for the last year isn't bad enough."

They pull out into light after-bar traffic. Ernie's feeling a touch of fuzziness on the backs of his eyes. He's in no shape to drive and he knows it, but the kid threatened to call the cops if Ernie didn't take him straight to the suit. "Come on," he says. "Look at you. They invited you to bring your suit all the way to Harvard. That's why you're here, isn't it? If it weren't for that suit, you and I never would've met because you wouldn't have your conference to go to."

A guffaw from the kid cuts Ernie off. "Are you kidding?" he says. "I'm just here because my advisor's here. He said he'd introduce me to—no, no, 'the suit'—hell, I was never even supposed to take it out of the lab. Do you have any idea how completely fucked I am if I don't get it back?"

"Hey, take it easy," Ernie says. The booze is taking over now, jumbling the kid's words, getting him all excitable, and Ernie doesn't want to wait and find out if he's a violent drunk. "My point is, you're getting away with it, aren't you? You caught me, kid. I'm taking you back to the suit. How can you say this thing destroyed your life?"

"You ought to know," he says. "You've been wearing it."

Ernie thinks about lying but he can't see the point. "Yeah," he says. "It's harder to move. Harder to breathe. Money feels like it's glued down. I got to tell you, though, if that's all there is, it isn't much of a downside."

"Isn't it?" The kid's giving him that dead-eyed stare in the rearview. "In my book, selling out all your values isn't such a small price to pay. Or is it your own glued-down money you've been stealing? You have been stealing, haven't you?"

Ernie feels his cheeks flush. Better than those other guys. That's what Janine always said. I guess she was wrong, Ernie thinks. I guess we were both wrong.

That doesn't sit well with Ernie, so he does what he always does when it comes to stuff like this: he talks himself out of it. "So what?" he says. "You said it yourself: I took myself out of the loop of cause and effect. Even if it's only for ten minutes, for ten minutes there's no consequences."

"What else have you done?" says the kid. "Do you find yourself lying more often? Breaking the rules in general? Even when you're not wearing the device?"

"Hey," Ernie says, "don't get all high and mighty on me. You're just a kid. What do you know?"

"I know I never meant to lie to my wife," he says. "I know the human body needs a little something extra to make it through thirty-two hour days. I know . . ."

Ernie can hear it in his voice: the kid wants to stop himself, but the booze went and loosened his tongue and now he can't stop talking. He says, "I know the first time I fell asleep wearing the device I told myself I'd never make such a waste of it again. I've been taking epinephrine every night ever since, and to be honest I'm not sure I can stop. I'm on sleeping pills to counteract the epinephrine and I'm not sure I can quit on those either."

The kid starts crying. "And what's the point?" he says. Ernie really cannot stand seeing a grown man cry. Maybe it's a generational thing. Maybe it's old-fashioned machismo. Whatever it is, there's not enough beer in the world to make Ernie cry in front of a man he hardly knows. His eyes dodge the rearview like they might see his sister in it naked.

"All that to finish in a year," the kid says. "I've become a drug addict so I can look better on paper. So I can land a job where I'll always have to wonder if the reason I got hired was because I had an unfair advantage. You had it all wrong," he says, sobbing. "You never escape cause and effect. You just draw your cards from the deck in the wrong order."

Habit makes Ernie glance up at the mirror. Big mistake. "Jesus H.," he says. "Why're you telling me all this, kid?"

"So you'll give it back to me," the kid says, his voice quivering. His whole face is red and wet; his eyes are bloodshot. "So I won't have to call the cops," he says. "So I can get the device back without having to admit I lost it. So I can go back to screwing up my life, I guess."

He starts crying again.

"Jesus," says Ernie.

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They get to Ernie's place. "That'll be fifty-eight fifty," he says. The kid looks up at Ernie and laughs. At least he can take a joke.

Ernie asks him what his name is. "Ernest," the kid says.

"You gotta be kidding," Ernie says with a laugh. "That's my name! My folks named me after Hemingway."

"Mine too," says Ernest. His voice is real quiet. "They wanted me to go into literature."

"Hell," says Ernie, "I don't know what they wanted for me, but it sure as hell wasn't driving cabs. Wait here."

He goes inside, gets the Samsonite carry-on from the basement, and crams the suit in it. It's not a hard decision. It might have been if they'd started their conversation on Ernie's front porch, but they were driving all the way from Cambridge and Ernie had plenty of time to think. Plenty of places to turn off, places he could've dropped the kid and kept driving. This time of night, the wrong neighborhood, maybe skinny little Ernest never comes back.

Maybe. Or maybe Ernie just drives him someplace secluded, lets him out, breaks both his knees with the front bumper. Pick a dark place and turn the lights off and no one could get a good look at his plates. He could've made skinny little Ernest a speed bump, even backed over him to make sure, and the only description the cops would've had is "a taxi cab."

Ernie could have done it but he didn't. He can't exactly explain why, either. Maybe it's because he wasn't sure he could have gotten away with it. Maybe it's because he got away with everything so far and he didn't want to push his luck. Or maybe getting away with it isn't as easy as it sounds. Ernie's not sure. He just knows this one wasn't the hard decision.

Ernie gets behind the wheel, passes the case back to Ernest, and pulls a U-turn to take the kid back to the Yard. "This isn't my suitcase," says Ernest.

"Yeah, well, the suit's in it," says Ernie. "Don't get picky on me."

"No," the kid says. "You don't understand." Ernie can hear him futzing with zippers. "There was a journal," he says. "It had a log of the time I've borrowed. I need it back or I won't know where to start borrowing from again."

Maybe you ought to lay off the borrowing, Ernie wants to say. Maybe it'll help you quit the pills. But Ernie figures it's not for him to get all high and mighty on this kid. "My wife's got it," he says.

"I need it back," says Ernest.

Ernie looks at him through the mirror. "Kid," he says, "you don't know what you're asking."

All the kid says is, "I need it back."

Ernie pulls up in front of Janine's sister's place and the living room drapes are thin enough that he can see they've still got the kitchen lights on. He sighs and says, "Give me the damn suitcase."

He rings the doorbell and her sister peeks out between the drapes. Janine comes down after a minute. Ernie takes a deep breath. "I need to tell you something," he says, "and I'm gonna tell it to you straight."

It's a month later when Ernie gets a call. It's seven PM and Ernie's been driving since seven that morning. That's become a regular thing for him. He knocks off for half an hour once or twice to grab a bite and read, but otherwise he's running Logan and Brigham and Massachusetts General like clockwork. He does it for Janine, he says, but when he takes the time to think about it he knows it's more than just that.

He's got another regular thing going these days: he tends to take lunch at a particular 7-Eleven. The old guy behind the counter there probably thinks Ernie's a

scatterbrain, what with him always forgetting his change on the counter when he leaves. Ernie would do the same at a particular gas station too, only the girl they used to have got fired. It wasn't even over Ernie robbing the place. The poor kid was too honest to keep the change he kept leaving on the counter, and her boss canned her for being over whenever she closed out her register. Ernie talked Roberta at dispatch into getting her a job, but the kid hasn't taken to it. Ernie'll tell you it just goes to show how hard it is to do right by somebody after you did them wrong.

He's at home on the sofa reading Sherman Alexie when the phone rings. It's Ernest; he recognizes the voice right away. He doesn't know how the kid got his number, but then the kid is wicked smart. "I just wanted to thank you," he says.

"For what?" says Ernie.

"Returning the device," says Ernest. "And the suitcase and the journal."

Ernie laughs. He ended up driving that kid all the way back to the Yard for free that night, but does he get thanks for that? "You don't have to thank a guy for returning what he stole from you," he says.

"Yeah, well, thanks anyway."

"How you doing with those pills?" says Ernie.

"How are you doing with that wife?" says Ernest.

Ernie laughs again, but for once he's pretty happy on that front. Janine spent the night. They both had a few drinks in them and in the morning Janine said it was probably a mistake, but Ernie liked the sound of the word *probably*. She let him give her a kiss on his way out the door, and that's not bad.

The night he came to get the kid's carry-on he told her the whole shebang. She didn't believe him. Called him a lying sack of shit, actually, but he was surprised to learn he really didn't care whether she believed him or not. The big thing was that he told her the truth. It was the hardest decision he'd made in a long time. He still can't say it felt good, but it felt right.

That's not much comfort, by the way, and he'll be the first to say so. He'll say, You know that satisfaction people talk about? The one you get from doing the right thing? Well, that and a buck'll get you a cup of coffee.

On the phone he says, "Let me tell you this, kid: it's not easy to make things right with someone when she don't believe you. It's even harder when the true story is the most cockamamie thing you ever heard of. So thanks for inventing that suit, huh? And for leaving it in my cab. You damn Harvard types."

Now the kid laughs. He says, "You're the one who put it on. I suppose you're going to blame me for that, too?"

A memory comes back to Ernie: the image of a skinny drunk in his back seat on the drive back to the Yard, folding that suit over and over in his hands. He looked like he was thinking pretty hard about it. Ernie doesn't know the kid well or anything, but for some reason he's got hope for him.

"Hey, you're not going to believe what happened to me today," Ernie says. "I'm dropping off a couple of Frenchmen at their hotel and they don't understand tipping. Fifty bucks they left me. I tell you what, me and Janine are eating steak tonight."

"That's great, Ernie."

The kid's tone is flat and Ernie knows their conversation is over. "Listen," he says, "you take care of your girls, kid. Keep 'em close."

"You too, Ernie," says the kid, his tone still flat, and Ernie's not sure he'll ever hear from him again.

But if it's the last thing the kid ever told him, at least it was good advice. Ernie's going to keep Janine as close as he can. He's already decided he's taking her to Davio's tonight if she's up for it. If not, the next night, maybe. He figures it'll all work itself out. They've got time. ○

# NEXT ISSUE

APRIL/MAY  
DOUBLE  
ISSUE

There's a bit of a Steampunk feel to our colossal April/May double issue. A journey of discovery is related in **Alexander Jablovskiy's** complex and compelling cover story about a pair of intrepid twins. On "The Day the Wires Came Down," this enchanting twosome uncovered a few remarkable secrets about the overhead tramlines that crisscrossed the upper reaches of their city. The darker side of the Steam Age is explored in **Christopher Barzak's** surreal look at life in "Smoke City."

ALSO  
IN  
APRIL/MAY

A young woman awaits her fate on a ship stranded in deep space in Hugo Award winner **Kristine Kathryn Rusch's** suspenseful new novelette, "Becalmed"; Philip K. Dick Award winner **Rudy Rucker** continues his exploration of the wonders of biological nanotech in his short story about "The Fnoor Hen"; Nebula Award winner **Esther M. Friesner** weaves together more than one SF trope while spinning the risqué tale of "The One Who Got Away"; Hugo and Nebula Award winner **Michael Swanwick's** bittersweet new short story takes a look at all the possibilities to be found in "An Empty House With Many Doors"; complex military maneuvers, competing human constructs, and scheming groups of aliens are all a part of **Tom Purdom's** latest novelette, "A Response from EST17"; a painful parent and child reunion is accomplished in Hugo and Nebula Award winner **Mike Resnick's** "The Homecoming"; **Jack Skillingstead** flies us to the far future to investigate the truth behind "The Flow and the Dream"; Bram Stoker finalist **Nick Mamatas** marks his first appearance in *Asimov's* with a vivid reminiscence about a traumatic night with "North Shore Friday"; and, in "Clockworks," **William Preston** tells a new tale about the younger days of the heroic character featured in his March 2010 story about "Helping Them Take the Old Man Down."

OUR  
EXCITING  
FEATURES

The distinguished Grand Master, **James Gunn**, takes a charming look at the life of the magazine's founder in the April/May Thought Experiment: "Celebrating Isaac." Since **Robert Silverberg** couldn't cram everything into one Relections column, we'll learn some additional secrets when he reveals yet "More About the Plot Genie"; **Norman Spinrad** examines both Steampunk and the New Weird in "On Books: Urbi et Orbi"; plus you'll find an array of poetry you're sure to enjoy. Look for our April/May double issue on sale at your newsstand on March 1, 2011. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com's* Kindle, *Barnes and Noble.com's* Nook, and *ebookstore.sony.com's* eReader!

# LOST IN THE MEMORY PALACE, I FOUND YOU

Nick Wolven

**Nick Wolven lives in New York City and often feels confused by his surroundings. His story this issue looks at the search for a soul mate in a world of rapid progress and bewildering change.**

**A**t the start of the week I have another attack. Total memory breakdown. I can't remember my current address, my current job. I look out the window and see a street of unfamiliar buildings, some of which are being torn down, some constructed before my eyes.

Fortunately, I remember where my phone is: under the bed. The Internet reminds me that I'm a thirty-five-year-old male of fluid sexual preferences. Good to know. I open a career tracker. Apparently I'm supposed to be designing a series of net-spots for a grocery chain.

Well, whatever pays the bills. I throw on some poplin, head to the street in search of stimulants. I'm not concerned about my memory lapses. It's the price of living in a fast-paced world. You learn to adapt. Memory is overrated, anyway.

Most of the time.

On Wednesday I call Ming and tell him I've made up my mind. I'm going to do the lim.

"That's great!" Ming grins up from my wrist display. Ming always seems to be grinning. He needs to practice being personable, since his job is low on human contact. "Always happy to support a friend!"

I take the hint and wire him a credit hit, bundled options and securities backed by a package of sub-rights to African mining contracts. The market for mineral rights has been stable lately; I've got a lot of such securities in my portfolio.

I used to feel strange about bribing people like Ming—bribing the government datajocks, I mean. But Ming says it's factored into their pay, like tips for waiters. They're expected to do "personal research" on the side.

Ming's eyes twinkle as the funds find their sweet spot. He likes to run emotefacts on his visual streams. I'm grateful he doesn't favor laugh tracks.

"So what's your hook?" he asks me. "Face, place, or thing?"

"Face."

"How old is the contact?"

I search my memory. Of course, if my memory were good for much, I wouldn't be doing this.

"I'm not sure."

"Ah." A tiny light bulb appears above Ming's pixilated head. "You had a flashback?"



"That's right."

"Tell me about it."

"I was in a bus, riding through a ghetto."

"Where?"

"I don't know. Gray tenements and hardware stores. Black, Jewish, Latin."

"Could be anywhere," Ming says.

"Then it came to me. A memory. A girl with curly bangs. Petite. Short, dark hair. She was standing in a door. The sun was behind her. I remember blowing curtains."

"Audio?" Ming says.

"No."

"Smells?"

"Smoke."

"Interesting." I hear Ming clicking, fussing. "Who was she, do you think? Lover? Friend? Not to put a fine point on it: did you get sexy vibes?"

"She was holding a cigarette. She put it out. That was all."

"What's the affect? How did you feel?"

"I felt hope."

"Sounds like a hard case," Ming says. "You've got a pile of weak markers, there. Not to put a fine point on it: this could take a long time."

"Not to put a fine point on it: how long are we talking?"

"No more than two weeks. You mind wearing glasses for that long?"

"Not if they're fashionable."

"Awesome. Here's the plan. I'll send you a lim kit by mail: glasses, headphones, a slow-release scent capsule. Be careful with them; you have to return them when you're done. We'll run visuals on you by day and try some scents and audio at night. Of course we'll be monitoring your reactions the whole time."

"Will I notice anything?"

"What do you think, Einstein? They call it subliminal stimulation for a reason. No, you won't notice anything, but your body will. Conditioned responses and such. You can go about your normal business, but you'll feel a bit disoriented."

"What else is new?"

He grins. "Don't make any impulse purchases. Seriously, Ray, you sure you want to put yourself through this? All to dig up the name of some ancient one-night stand? Some face in the crowd?"

"For hope," I say, "I'd put myself through anything."

I lie awake that night thinking about the girl I'm going to find—the beautiful woman buried in my memory. The thought of her waiting back there, out there—in *there*—is like a good song that never stops playing. Who was she? Did she love me? Has she forgotten all about me, as I've very nearly forgotten her?

Thursday is coffee with Ruben, a quick discussion of the FoodWay contract. I get lost on the way to the meeting. The bus routes have changed again. I check the mapping services, but they're all behind the times, or maybe ahead of the times.

I end up in a new hood, fresh towers going up on all sides, a smell of melted polymers in the air. You can see the buildings growing like huge black crystals, invading the light-polluted sky. The construction-bots are hard at work. I hear them, busy as bees, droning like a microwave.

At last I find the location of the lunch meeting, a new joint by the river with tapestries and rattan furniture. Espresso steam wanders like the Milky Way across the eyes of the prettyboy cashier. The cashier tells me I look like Van Gogh, but, you know, less green. I wire him a big tip.

Ruben sits in the back, waving. Ruben is Claire's replacement. I never met Claire.

I have only met Ruben, and only twice. He tells me I look tired. I tell him espresso has that effect on me. I tell him it's ironic.

"You remember Boris, right?" Ruben says. A big flat-nosed man nods from a nearby chair. "And Yevgeni?" Ruben says. Another figure swivels. "They're looking for an update on the Vendi account," Ruben says.

"I thought this was the FoodWay account," I say.

"It is," says Ruben. "It's also the Vendi account. The Vendi account is a sub-account of the FoodWay account."

"Just show us the proofs," the man named Boris says.

I wire them some proofs I have in my portfolio. I don't remember making the proofs. Maybe I subcontracted for them. At any rate, the men seem satisfied. They pay me with a bundle of account-addresses and passkeys, access to microfinance funds maintained by a Balkan state. It's a little shady, but I don't complain.

Boris says, "Pow," when he transfers the account numbers. I remember him now. He always says *Pow*.

Yevgeni says, "Don't spend it all on one face."

"You guys need a new shtick," I say.

Yevgeni says, "Forget shtick. Take a look at those crumpets."

He's looking at something behind me. I ask, "Do they have crumpets here?" For some reason everyone laughs.

Friday I pick up the limpact. The glasses are smart enough. In Boondock Montana they might pass for a real accessory. There's also a patch that goes under my arm. The scent pack is a little thing that clips to my collar. The earphones are labeled, *For Night Use Only*.

I put the glasses on and wait for something to happen. I stare hard at the lenses, searching for subliminal images. I don't see a thing. There's a button on the frame. When I press it, I see Terms of Use displayed in the glasses, pre-signed, though I don't remember signing anything. I skim the legalese.

... by submitting to subliminal mnemonic stimulation, you grant to the Federated Archives rights and access to all private records bearing on the identification of target events, and further ...

... signify your understanding that monitored reactions will include, but not be limited to: pupil dilation, muscle contraction, skin conductivity, sub-vocalizations (in complying politics), vocalized pseudo-references (i.e. Freudian slips), heart rate, respiratory rate ...

... for the sole purpose of tracing so-called "unconscious memories" ...

An awful lot of boilerplate for a process that amounts to hi-tech fortune telling. I press the button again, and the contract disappears. I put the earpiece and headphones in my computer case.

Friday night is a free night. I check my feeds. Diane wants to talk. Someone named Betty wants to get to know me. Roger will be at the 2fer. I post a vague status so no one will be offended.

I activate the bedroom mirror and try the glasses with ten different shirts. Nothing matches, so I put in an order: yellow, imitation jacquard. I hit the fridge and say, "Shake me. Banana." I drink the shake and pick up my shirt at the hall dispenser.

Before I leave, I check the mirror again. "No date, no fate," I tell my reflection.

The 2fer is a dead zone, not a prettyboy or chickadee in sight. Funny; it used to be so hip. I look for MacAttack, but it's gone. The Shark Lounge is closed for renovations. I have a running tab at the Shark Lounge, and the scanner by the door picks up my RFID. It tells me there's been a change of location; try Reagan Street. I don't

know where that is. I hit the maps and there's no Reagan Street anywhere in the three cities. Big surprise. Presidents are out. All the streets are named after Japanese baseball players now, like the parks. I decide to try One-Eight.

The neighborhood around One-Eight has changed. It's a candyland, now, all glass and light, a carnival atmosphere. The tourists have gotten hold of it. I miss the gritty look it had last month.

Inside One-Eight, everything smells like frangipani. They're doing smoke-art above the dance floor. The west bar has been colonized by a flock of chickadees trading drug-laced pacifiers. Not my scene. Light breaks in the east: a prettyboy winks at me above the milling heads. Something in my brain cries out *cashier*, but I can't think where I've seen him. A little while ago I hooked up with a wrap shop cashier, but that was a chickadee. I remember breasts, knee-high boots.

The prettyboy sidles to my side. "Van Gogh!"

It connects. I grin. "A little less green."

"Take a sip of that." He points at the drink he just handed me. "You may turn green after all."

The drink tastes of sweetness, joy, disinhibition. "What's your dating tag?" I say to my new companion.

"Michael."

"Like the archangel."

"Sure. If you behave." He studies my face in the glow of the smoke-art display. "How long have you been around, Vincent?"

At the moment, I can't remember. I flash him my stats. He skims the numbers. "Well, well, Mr. Old-Timer. Looks like you'll be paying me, tonight."

"That's all right. I'm rolling in credit."

"You'd better be," Michael says. "I'm two thirds your age."

I nudge him toward the bar. "Come on. I've got a fresh credit line I've been waiting to tap. Russian oil money, peaking on a scare. Let's blow it before they invent cold fusion."

"I don't know if they take oil here," Michael says.

"They'll take it the way I plan to spend it."

At the bar there are mirrors and fluorescents. I get a good look at Michael. He really is an angel. Gold hair and feather-soft skin. I promise myself not to forget his face. I'm generous with promises when I tap new credit.

I stroke his forearm. "Boy, I'm going to blow a fortune tonight. All on one face. Don't tell Yevgeni."

"Don't tell who?"

I shake my head. "Cross-connect."

Michael points at the menu. "Hey! Look what they have!"

I follow his finger to the drink specials, laugh and give him a squeeze.

"Vincent and I," Michael tells the bartender, "are going to share a Starry Night."

Saturday morning is Michael in a mask, Michael biting a zipper, Michael tossing me this way and that. Michael has nice abs and shoulders, no chest. His skin is soft and hairless, like a child's. I'm happy with his appearance, with my own performance. Sometimes I like being an Old Timer.

We rip my flimsy folding bed from the wall and frolic like two castaways. For once, I'm glad to be living in cheap housing, even if it means moving ten times a year.

By the time we're tuckered out, it's bright morning. I climb out of bed and get my glasses off the nightstand. Michael watches me put them on.

"You're limming, huh? I noticed those last night. Face, place, or thing?"

"Face," I say, climbing back into bed. "Some girl I used to know."

I don't tell him what the girl means to me. I don't tell him her face is like a song, a holiday decoration, a sudden intensification of sunlight—an image that fills me with hope.

Michael says, "Don't get too excited. I tried it once. Limming. I was looking for an old video game I used to play, when I lived with my mother in her bungalow in Cuba." His voice grows steadily quieter as he speaks, so that listening to him is like falling asleep.

"All I remembered," Michael says, "was standing in a palace, by the sea. Thousands of rooms. I didn't remember what the game was about. Only that scene."

I hear an argument through the thin walls, the sound of streaming TV, unfamiliar languages. A chorus of alarms serenades us, fades.

"It didn't take long to track it down," Michael says. "A day of limming screenshots. Glasses only. After ten hours they called with the ocular response charts. I played the game again. It was awful."

"Those old games never hold up," I say. "The industry's advancing at light speed."

Michael shakes his head. "That wasn't the problem. The thing is, before I found the game, I felt like the past still existed in some way. You know? Like it was all out there waiting for me. But when I played that game, I realized it was gone. The bungalows, my mother, the beaches, the coastline. Even Cuba. Does Cuba still exist?"

He squints, as though he can see the scene above us even now, the palace by the sea with its myriad towers and windows.

"Maybe it's not so good to have a strong memory," Michael says. "Maybe in some ways it's smarter to forget."

I stare at the ceiling through my glasses. Michael's story hangs over us like a tent. I feel that we're trapped in a cell, that our silence is eating up the air. We're going to suffocate if we don't speak soon.

"That's too bad," I say. I give Michael a kiss. "I'm going to the bathroom. I'll be right back."

When I come out of the bathroom, Michael is gone.

On Sunday I have another meeting for the FoodWay contract, across town in a corporate park. The bus routes have changed again. The trains are on a reduced schedule due to a police investigation. No one seems to know what the investigation is about. I try to rent a car, but the computer on the phone says my credit is bad.

"Which credit?" I say. "I have two hundred credit lines in my pocket portfolio."

The AI says, "Sorry, chump. I'm not licensed to reveal that information."

"Is it the Russian oil? Did they invent fusion power?"

"How would I know, jerk?" the AI says and disconnects.

I decide to risk the zip-lines. I head to the terminal and strap myself into the suit. A robot hooks me to the cable, and next thing I know I'm reeling across town, my own private sky-car. I feel nauseous. The lim is getting to me. I keep picturing blowing curtains, flowing cigarette smoke. I hear a girl's voice.

By the end of the trip I'm dizzy as though after deep dreams. The zip-line dumps me in the wrong neighborhood. I stagger across the landing platform. "What the hell?" I say to the robot at the terminal. "I have an appointment, you know."

The robot displays a virtual person on its public interface screen.

"This is your appointment, moron. Change of venue. It's in your public calendar. What, did you forget? Stupid!"

I'm getting sick of these new AIs, with their so-called authentic attitude. "Appointments are old-fashioned, anyway," I grumble, and stalk away.

It's an old neighborhood, behind the fashion curve by a year at least. Helium-

purple and obsidian trim, pennoncel and half-arches, neo-Brancusian curvomatics. Flowerbeds.

The FoodWay appointment is in a curved faux-stone tower, a gray talon. I'm only an hour late. Except now they're no longer FoodWay, and Ruben's a no-show. In the rented conference room I find a short Asian man at a teak-top table.

"Simon!" he says, rising to greet me.

"I'm Ray," I say. "And I think I'm in the wrong place."

"What are you looking for?" the Asian man says.

"FoodWay. Vendi. Design contract."

"Yes!" he says, smiling. "Except, no. No more FoodWay. Now, Lodexho-Yu."

"Bought out, huh?"

"Last night. I am Jurgen."

"Jurgen?" I take a seat at the teak-top. "What have you done with Ruben?"

Jurgen's face puckers with confusion. "Who?"

"Ruben," I say. "Tall guy. Good taste in shirts. He was filling in for Claire."

"Who?"

"Claire. She works for FoodWay. I mean, Vendi. I mean, Lodexho-Yu."

"We are Lodexho-Yu."

"So Claire no longer works for you?"

"Who is this Claire?"

"I don't know. I never met her. All I know is that she hired Ruben."

"Ruben?"

"The guy with the shirts."

"My friend," Jurgen says, "we *all* wear shirts."

I have no response to this. Jurgen gives the table a rap. "Simon," he says.

"My name is Ray."

"We are concerned," Jurgen says, thumbing through a laminated portfolio, "about your designs."

"What's wrong with them?"

Jurgen squints at one of my proofs. He flips it over. He rotates it. "They are . . . old-fashioned."

"That's because FoodWay," I say, "is an old-fashioned company."

"There is no FoodWay," Jurgen says. "We are Lodexho-Yu."

"I know." I pat the table. "Things change. I understand completely. You have my total support."

"Ray."

"My name is Simon."

"Simon."

"I mean Ray."

"We will accept your designs, Ray. But we insist on owning full modification rights. And there will be a currency downgrade."

My blood goes bubbly. "No more Shanghai electrics?"

"We are prepared to give you," Jurgen says soberly, "a fully diversified collectibles package—"

"Collectibles!" I practically fall out of my chair.

"With autotrades enabled—"

"You're paying me in comic book and action figure securities?"

"—in five major markets—"

"Just let me redo the contract!"

"And that," Jurgen says, "is our final offer."

I feel the flashback coming a second before it hits. The memories rise in me like nausea. Flowers in a field. The Eiffel Tower gowned in light. A fly on a yellow cur-

tain. A woman's voice. Where did I encounter these things? Five years ago? Ten years ago? What do they mean?

"Ray?" Jurgen's voice comes from far away. "Simon? Ruben?"

"It's okay," I stammer. "I'm limming. It's a government project. I'm connecting with my past."

I get to my feet, knocking over my chair.

"I'm looking for a girl," I explain. "Someone I used to know . . ."

"Ray? Are you all right?"

"My name," I shriek, striking the table, "is *Vincent!*"

Pain runs up my arm; the memories vanish. Beyond Jurgen's worried face, I see a new skyscraper going up, teeming with construction-bots, crawling into the sky like a monstrous caterpillar. "There goes the neighborhood," I say.

Jurgen shakes his head.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'm tired. Too much espresso. It's ironic, you see. Can we reschedule? Would Tuesday work for you?"

"On Tuesdays," Jurgen says, "I live in California."

I stare at him for a full minute before I realize I've been brushed off.

"You know," I say, on my way out the door, "the guys from Vendi liked my proofs just fine."

Jurgen rolls his eyes. "What can you expect from the Japanese?"

I wander the skywalks in a daze, tower to tower. In an enclosed glass footbridge I pause and watch a storm develop over the triple cities, even though my phone tells me no storms are scheduled till the end of the week.

I decide to call Ming. He answers after twenty-seven rings.

"Hey. How are things? Joseph, isn't it?" Ming's eyes sparkle like stars.

"It's Ray," I say. "And I'm losing my mind."

"Oh, that's right. You're limming." His face literally beams at me, projecting golden rays. Through the audio I hear him tapping and shuffling, looking up my file. "A face. A bus ride. Flashing lights. We've been running curtains, shoes, and cigarettes on you. The cigarettes are a bust. I see you haven't used the scent pack. You say you've been getting some bleedthrough?"

"I don't know what that means."

"The subliminals. They're working up into your conscious thoughts? You're seeing things? Getting flashbacks? Mood swings?"

"I'm flipping out," I say. "I just blew an important contract."

"It's your memory, champ. You're not used to using it."

"They're paying me in collectibles, Ming. If they decide to pay me at all."

"I used to collect things, once," Ming says. "Butterflies. Shark teeth. Now there's some guy in Malaysia who does it for me. A trust fund, you know. I wonder if he still keeps up with it."

"Ming, I've got to find her."

"His name is Ananda. He works by referral only. I could give you a letter, but I can't promise anything."

"Ming, what are you talking about?"

"I was in coins, after teeth. Then newspapers. Then coral. Then coins again. I should have stayed with coral. It's dying out the fastest."

"The girl, Ming. Not the collector. I'm talking about the girl. The girl with curly hair, from my memory. The girl who meant something to me, once."

Ming frowns, and a question mark glows above his head. "I thought you said you were moving into collectibles."

"I've got to find her," I say. "She gave me hope, Ming. Do you know what that's like?"

His image is all warm smiles and sunshine, but I hear him sigh. "Look, Joe. I mean, Ray. We're zeroing in. But it takes time. Currently, we've got significant ocular response to a curtain swatch. Only three companies have ever used the pattern. They track usage, of course, through public photo uploads, and if we kick over some credit I can tap their indices—"

"How much, Ming?"

"Excuse me?"

"How much credit will this take?"

"Backed by collectibles? I don't know. Unless you're trading in scrimshaw. I heard the last sperm whale died last week. Not to put too fine a point on it, Ray, but—"

"Forget it. I'll give up on the pocket accounts, tap my savings portfolio. Just find her, Ming. Please."

Monday is a new account, a flight to Nebraska, an agribusiness tycoon in an office tower grinning over stock photography.

Tuesday is a recreational day. Wednesday is my recovery from the recreational day. Thursday is also a recovery.

Friday I fly to Johannesburg to replenish my supply of recreational substances.

Saturday through Tuesday are a blur.

Wednesday night is recuperation in the arms of a busty brunette. She calls me Duce and I call her Clara. I feed her lingerie from the hall dispenser. She asks me to strip and stand in the corner. "Nice crumpets," she tells me, and I force a laugh.

Thursday, Ming calls. "You reacted in a big way to government housing in Paris. Lots of ocular response, skin conductivity spikes. We're getting close."

Sunday, I'm evicted from my apartment. It's not my fault: the whole building has been torn down. Seems the Israeli landlord invested too heavily in cold fusion. "Tough break, champ," the new AI landlord says.

Sunday night I have a breakdown. I see visions. I'm on a Paris street. I hear the ocean. I'm on a cliff above the sea. I'm lost in a magic palace in which all rooms connect, looking for someone, but I can't seem to find her . . . I feel my mother's presence. Does my mother live near the sea? Last I heard, my mother was designing belts in Moscow. Is this even my own memory, my own past?

Someone told me once that it's better to forget the past. An angel. Or perhaps it was my father. At any rate, I'm starting to see what he meant.

More visions of the girl with curly hair. Yellow light glows behind her, cigarette smoke trickles past her eyes. The sensation of hope is like a taste, like honeydew, like fruit punch.

On Monday, Ming calls again. "We found her."

I book a red-eye to Spain. My mystery girl lives there, according to Ming. Her name is Jeanine. I say the name to myself repeatedly. It's charming and strange that the girl should have a name.

In the airport I realize I ought to warn Jeanine I'm coming. I take out my phone. What if Jeanine speaks only Spanish? I make sure my translation software is up to date and leave a voice message. I try to be vague but not creepy, suave but not sleazy.

The flight passes in a haze of video games. Spain rises around me, old stone foundations capped with glassy towers. Is this Barcelona? Did it used to be Barcelona? The signs are in an unfamiliar script. The people speak a strange language, not Spanish, not English. My wristex GPS guides me over a medley of pavements, cobbles and concrete slabs, macadam, recycled lignin binding artificial soilbeds.

I'm in the city center when Jeanine calls back. On my wrist, she looks just as I remember, small, pretty, bangs in her eyes.



"Ray?" She speaks English, with a faint Irish accent.

"You remember me."

Her face is hard to read. Amusement? Anger? She says, "Oh, you bet."

We meet in a bookshop, a paneled parlor with rickety chairs. People line up at the recycler, dumping in old books and wedding catalogs, waiting as the scrubber and printer grind away, walking off happily with travel guides and magazines.

Jeanine sits at a table by the coffee bar. When I see her, it hits me again—pure hope, so powerful it nearly unhinges my knees. It's like arriving in a new country, like buying a new home.

I sit across from her. We watch each other for a long time.

"Listen," I say. "I'm going to level with you, Jeanine. I don't remember you very well. You know the story: life is hectic, things move too fast. It's overwhelming, it's overstimulating—frankly, I don't have time to worry about it. I found you with a lim. I want you to know that."

Jeanine lights a cigarette.

"I remember your face," I say. "I remember you with a cigarette, just like now. I remember that you meant something to me, once. You gave me hope."

Jeanine takes a drag. Smoke pours from her nose. The future is here, imminent and wonderful; I can sense it, a wildness of lights rushing up to swallow me, dazzling and hopeful like a city below a plane.

"Unbelievable," Jeanine says.

I prickle with fear.

"You don't remember. You really don't."

I grip my coffee cup with both hands. "I want to remember. Please."

"Poor Ray. Still living the fast life, after all these years."

The book recycler thumps and growls. A bookstore patron walks away with a celebrity memoir.

"It's a wild life, isn't?" says Jeanine. "A bright, exciting world. And it keeps getting better and better, all the time."

For the first time in my life I feel truly lost. I see myself standing atop a palace by the sea. Is it a memory? What does the image mean?

"Eight years ago," Jeanine says, tapping ash from her cigarette, "I was a young untalented artist, living in Paris. You showed up on my doorstep, said you knew me from somewhere, just like now. A vision, you said, a memory. You scared me, at first. But you were so hopeful. You really believed."

Construction-bots are remodeling a building across the street, turning it into a shoe store. "What happened?" I whisper.

"What do you think? It was thrilling, at first. Like a hunt for buried treasure. We traveled Europe, talked through the night. We looked at old photographs, films, journals, games. I was so excited. Think of it! A handsome man, coming out of the blue, talking about fate and hope.

"It was thrilling," Jeanine says, "and then it wasn't. All the searching we did. So many moments, so many records. I couldn't believe how much I'd forgotten."

She aims her cigarette at my eyes: a challenge.

"Was that really me in the photographs? That girl with the ponytail? Had I really lived in that house, kissed that boy? Was that really my online journal; were those really my childhood friends? It was grueling. The closer we looked at the past, the more distant it seemed. I started to think about what it means, then—to be a ghost in a machine."

"But we found something," I say. "We must have found something. I remember . . ."

"We sure tried. We paid the government datajocks everything we had. Dig up the past for us, tell us what it means! Quite a racket those folks run."

The coffee shop is changing around us, wood turning to metal, glass to fabric. My chair shrinks, buckles, folds in on itself, so gently that I scarcely notice I'm sinking toward the floor. A passing man notices my discomfiture, waves and laughs. "Remodeling," he says. "Every morning at nine. Programmable nano-materials. Isn't it neat?"

Did he really say "neat"? Is my translation software up to date?

Jeanine is changing, too. She taps something behind her ear. Her hair turns yellow. Her curls uncurl. Long, straight locks hang around her eyes. Her muscles twitch, tense; her face pulls back, tight on the bones. New eyebrow hairs sprout; her lipstick changes color; her eyes phase from gray to blue.

"But our connection," I say desperately. "We had a connection. We meant something to each other."

Jeanine is taller now, thinner. My chair has become a cushion. We're in a Japanese tearoom, all cedar and clean lines.

"What do you want the past to be, Ray?" Her voice is changed, unfamiliar. She has a French accent. She looks at her cigarette. "Isn't that the point?"

"Were we lovers?" I say. "Friends? Siblings? Are you a celebrity? Help me, Jeanine, please. I feel—I don't know what I feel."

Jeanine is now a blonde woman, young and tall. When she taps her cigarette, it turns to smoke and blows away. She lifts a handbag off a nearby table. "I'm late for an appointment. And my name isn't Jeanine, these days. It's Daphne."

"Help!" I shout, falling off my cushion. "Please help me remember!"

Daphne pauses. Is that pity in her eyes, or disgust?

"At this point in my life, Ray, I'm more focused on forgetting."

She doesn't look back as she heads for the door.

The next weeks are a flurry of flights, rescheduling, damage control. Moscow, Tokyo, Mumbai, Prague. I live on energy boosters, vitamins, cocaine, caffeine. I plug into the sleep-simulation booths for ten-minute naps, make it through whole workweeks on two hours of sleep. I ride a wave of drugs and lights, soothed by the hands of prettyboys and chickadees, harried by a dozen new contracts I've taken on.

One day I have an attack. Total memory breakdown. I can't remember my job, my address, not even my age. When I come to I'm in a Toronto apartment, hardwood floors, plenty of light. A new building by a new canal, watery reflections winking through the windows.

My mind is a blank slate, raw from its recent cleansing. It's better this way. It's important to adapt. I appoint the apartment in disposable furniture, order new shirts. Plaid is back, apparently, and lace.

Apparently, I'm involved in some sort of agribusiness contract. It pays off big. Industrial pith, pyrethrum. My contact's name is Claire.

"I knew a Claire, once," I say. "I believe she had good taste in shirts. You don't think—?"

Claire shakes her head. "Until last week, I was a man."

Claire and I head home and rip my disposable bed from the wall. We tussle. We gasp. When I compliment her crumpets, she laughs. "I love retro slang."

Only one thing mars the moment. A vision: I'm in a palace by the ocean, searching for someone in the countless rooms. I find him at last; he embraces me, feather-soft and blonde, a young strong angel in my arms.

I file a mental note to call Ming tomorrow. Rent a lim kit, track down the scene. Just one problem, one cause for doubt.

When have I ever lived by the sea? ○

# PURPLE

Robert Reed

Of his latest tale, Robert Reed says, "My daughter and I know a barn owl. It lives in the nature center at a local park, and the bird is lucky to be alive. He is blind and one wing is missing, but he handles the visiting children with heroic indifference. So that's part of 'Purple.' A good friend volunteers at a raptor recovery operation outside Lincoln. Through him, my family and I got the full tour. We saw hawks and owls and rats waiting to die. There was a fifty-year-old golden eagle who looked exactly like a very old eagle—no wild bird loses feathers and acts that feeble. There was a bald eagle that had ingested lead pellets and gone crazy as a result. It was a great place, and I'm thankful it exists. But the whole operation depends on one woman who has made it the focus of her life, and while she is in absolute control of her world, I began thinking about those people who collect tigers or horses—big fancy beasts that eventually overwhelm even the most competent soul. The rest of 'Purple' comes from there."

**A word of warning:** There are scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some readers.

Without sound and without motion, the master arrives. The only sensation feels like moving air, like someone close breathing softly into his face. But real breath should be warm or perhaps cool. Real breath requires a mouth, and the master has no mouth. What Tito feels is a surge of electricity teasing the gullible neurons in his scarred cheeks and around his blind eyes. He smiles and stands, his surviving arm pushing at the floor until his legs can take charge. Then he tucks his hand into the belt, knuckles against his back as he dips his face in a reverent fashion. The master won't ask him to take this pose. But it feels expected, and he never considers doing otherwise.

He waits.

"Hello, Tito."

"Good morning, Master."

"How did you sleep?"

"Very well, thank you."

The master's voice has no gender, but that's the only quality it lacks. Each word is clear and strong, and despite being quicker than human speech, it is easily understood. This is how stone would sound, given the capacity for conversation. This is a great mountain speaking to a little man, and it is a blessing to be noticed by a life as special and vast as the master's.

Tito should feel honored.

"You're hungry," the master observes.

"I am, yes."

"What do you want for your breakfast?"

"Frosted flakes," he decides. "With cold milk and hot toast and plenty of butter. And soda pop, please."

The meal appears instantly.

Tito's quarters are small and familiar. He knows where the chair and table wait, and after sitting, he picks up a spoon with the smooth handle designed to fit no hand better than his. He has used the same plate and bowl for the last five thousand mornings. The master has an aptitude for judging portions. He eats his fill, nothing left. Then Tito rises and walks three steps to a toilet that exists only when needed. Life is composed of rhythms, and his body's rhythms are obvious to the master. Once finished, the toilet cleans his privates and vanishes, and his morning filth is examined for signs of disease or unusual decay. The master cares deeply for him, and evidence of that feeling comes with the endless attention to details.

"You didn't sleep well, Tito."

Found out, the human dips his head.

"What's wrong, my friend?"

Tito is "my friend" only on special occasions. The master is concerned, and those words are a signal.

"I had a bad dream, Master."

"Tell me."

"I was a little boy again. I was standing on the street corner, waiting for the bus. The bus on the purple line was going to take me to my school."

"You've had this dream before," the master says.

Tito sighs.

"But there's more," the voice guesses.

"I waited and waited, and a bus finally came around the corner. It looked like mine. It was yellow and loud, and there was a big white card in a side window. I saw the word, 'PURPLE' written out. But after the bus stopped . . . stopped in front of me, and the door opened . . . I realized that this wasn't my ride."

"What did you see?"

"The bus driver. Nothing else."

"Who was the driver?"

Tito takes a deep breath and lets it out again.

"Did you recognize the person?" asks the master.

"She wasn't human," he says.

"What was she?"

"I can't describe her," he explains. "Other than to call her alien, I suppose."

"This is different than usual," the master agrees.

Tito waits a moment. "Where will you put me today?"

"I haven't decided."

He says nothing.

"This driver," says that voice of stone. "Can you guess who she might have been?"

"No," he lies.

The master can't read thoughts, regardless what some people think. But it sees anxiety and can make shrewd guesses about what is true.

Tito bows again. "Who today, Master?"

"Brenda has been asking for you."

"Very good," he says, as if he means it.

What isn't a hand picks him up, and what isn't muscle and bone carries him away. Hundreds of citizens live inside the compound. Only a few dozen are human. Brenda has lived in the compound since she was nine. Like every resident, she is crippled, but her wounds are deep and invisible, tied to a childhood that she never mentions. A big loud woman who can talk for hours about any subject, Brenda always sounds confident and self-assured. Yet her noise and bluster are balanced upon a horrific past. What happened to her was not her fault. She wouldn't be here otherwise. But her soul holds the capacity for sudden, savage violence—cruelties delivered without warning, each incident followed in turn by loud, enthusiastic apologies.

Tito knows what those meaty arms and legs can do. After the last incident, she was warned that another mistake, no matter how minor, would mean she would never see Tito again. The master was explicit, and she has behaved ever since. As much as she can love anybody, Brenda loves Tito. Nothing helps a person feel good about her own miserable prospects than sharing the day with a small and blind one-armed man.

Every visit to Brenda begins with a description of the master. "Like a great shadow, only bright," she says. "More brilliant than fire, and gigantic too. He has a thousand arms and a million fingers but his touch is too light to feel, and he is gorgeous. No, better than gorgeous. If only you could see him, darling. If only you had your sight back, for just one moment. I swear to you, there's nothing more beautiful than the master."

Tito stands where he was set and nods, listening to very little, thinking about another beauty.

When he was brought to the compound, Tito didn't know anybody and understood nothing. He was scared and hurting, even when the master assured him that he was safe and would always be safe. Days and nights full of medicine and kind touches did their best. His ruined body recovered as far as possible, and when he was strong enough to ask questions, the master carried him to another home, introducing him to one of the resident children.

Adola wasn't much older than Tito, but she was already familiar with the compound. Her patient pretty voice tried to explain what could never be explained. Humans weren't smart enough to understand more than a sliver of their surroundings, but she promised this was a special place and every one of its citizens was fortunate. Everybody brought here was mangled and too weak to live with their own kind, but being broken wasn't all they had in common. Each of them was defined by what was good that was left behind. There was quite a lot left behind for Tito. His new friend touched him softly, praising him for everything he did well. Adola said that he had an excellent memory. Better than the other blind people, Tito could navigate his way across any home, even if he had visited just once. She also liked his humor and his fun sweet honest smile, and she loved what she would always call his "good heart." So of course he loved that girl in turn, and he loved her as a woman, and this will never change.

Besides the master, only Adola knows what happened to Tito as a boy. That was another reason he loved her. It has been four hundred and seventeen days since their last conversation, yet Tito still hears her voice and feels her face and her breasts and how she had held him close, his good heart pounding inside his aching, very sorry chest.

\* \* \*

Brenda interrupts his thoughts. "What did you do for breakfast?"

He describes his meal.

"I had eggs," she tells him. "Scrambled, and with one big pancake."

"You like that breakfast," he observes.

"Tomorrow might be cereal. Or it might be French toast. I haven't decided."

He listens as much as he needs to track the conversation. When she pauses, he says, "Yes." And if the pause continues, he tells her, "Please, go on."

"I was just thinking," she says.

He knows where this is moving but pretends innocence. "What were you thinking?"

"About you and me," she says.

He remains silent.

She stands behind him. Damp hands touch him, working to remain on his shoulders. He listens intently, feeling at the air. She moves even closer, mouth near his ear, and he thinks he can feel her soft ample body tensing up. Then with a quiet and patient and understanding voice, he says, "Later."

"Later?"

"Not yet."

"All right." One hand drops, brushing the side of his little body. She never touches the stump where an arm should be, though she's quick to claim nothing about him disgusts her. What she wants to grab is off-limits until he says, "Yes." That's one of the master's central rules. Sex is forbidden so long as one person says, "No."

"Not yet," Tito repeats.

And Brenda pulls her hands away, lying to herself when she says, "That's for the best. Build up the anticipation, and all that shit."

Memory is never perfect. Even in a life wrapped inside ritual and small circumstances, each day's experiences erode what remains of the days that came before. The best memory is sloppy. To hold what it can, the mind invents stories that are practiced and told to others and told to the teller, polished by hard use until it all feels smooth and familiar. Yet in subtle ways, the wrong creeps into the right. Tito cannot count the times that he has visited Brenda or most of the other companions, and there is no way to recall what they talked about when, much less their actual words. Yet he knows each of them as a friend and sometimes as lovers, and even the most difficult people give him moments of pleasure.

With Adola, he remembers everything.

After his first visit to her house, he started to count. The master carried him to her three fingers more than three hundred times, and she came into his house two dozen times. Her quarters were roomier and full of furniture, and there was much more to do. That was because she still had her eyes and could enjoy the space. Or it was because luck smiled on her, and she arrived when a large space was available. Or maybe it was because she was being rehabilitated to live on the Earth again, and her special machines needed long floors. Different days brought different explanations. But other people had one simple, reasonable explanation: Adola was the master's favorite, and didn't the prettiest sweetest human deserve the best?

Adola was younger than Tito when she arrived. The master had visited the Earth at the right moment, and the master happened to find her broken body lying in a ditch with other dead and dying people. She was brought here and died twice that first day. But the master revived her heart and put bandages into the bullet wounds, and her pain fell away, and she could see her surroundings and the machines that kept her alive and the master that she couldn't describe, even to herself. From the beginning, Adola said, "Don't think in normal ways. Don't think about bodies and

faces, no matter how strange you imagine them to be. Nothing about the master is that simple."

Some claimed the master was a god. Not a big god, perhaps, but an entity endowed with magic and wisdom.

And when Adola was a little girl, that's how she referred to the master. "The Master," she said with a loud, reverent voice. But later, seeing more and listening to others, she came to a rather different opinion.

"The master isn't alive," she told Tito. "Not even as a god-creature. What it is, I think . . . I think it's a set of emotions made bigger than anything we can imagine. It is the urge to do good for those who suffer. It is empathy and kindness. Somewhere, maybe millions of years ago, those emotions could have lived inside a real organism. But they grew huge and immortal, and that's what rescued us and what keeps us safe here."

Tito used to find that answer appealing, though he wasn't sure why.

Humans are rare here. What are common are winged aliens—three unrelated species—and a thoughtful beast that looks something like a cat. Each has its own collection of languages and its own special, carefully maintained homes. The species rarely interact with one another, but Adola asked questions and more questions, and since she was a favorite, the master eventually introduced her to the aliens, letting them answer what they could. That's where her strangest ideas came from. "And the master only seems big," she told Tito. "To go where it goes and do everything it does, size would be a liability. Mass would slow it down. So the master might really be too tiny to feel in your hand, if you ever should hold it."

Tito liked that image too.

When they were old enough and lovers, Adola warned him that there wouldn't be any babies. He hadn't thought about babies, but their absence bothered him and he asked why not.

Adola explained human reproduction, in detail, without a trace of shame.

He listened carefully, thinking about mothers and fathers.

"Neither of us is fertile," she said. "The master snips and cuts everyone who comes here."

In those days, the master was always reasonable and right.

"The master can't take care of babies," she said.

Babies did sound like troublesome creatures. But something in her words bothered him.

She touched Tito. In those places where permission was necessary, she held him, and her musical voice said, "A real and true god can do anything. But if you pay attention, you'll notice the master has many, many limitations."

Tito's stomach ached, and he said nothing.

"We have only so many habitats," she pointed out. "Even the most common residents—the crested hawk-beasts—number no more than two hundred at a time. And they come from a world full of millions and millions."

"I don't understand," he admitted. "What are you telling me?"

"I was dying in a ditch," Adola said. "Shot twice and bleeding, and my leg and arm were broken. And do you know who was under me? My mother. My big brother was beside me. The men shot my brother just once, and he was breathing harder than I was. He still had a voice. We laid there for a long time, listening to each other, and the bad men were lined up nearby, shooting more people. People that we knew. And my mother moaned so sadly and said she was sorry this had to happen. She was moving under me, and she was very weak, and then she said, 'Keep still, and when night comes, crawl away. Crawl for the bush and try to live.'"

"Then she died, and we laid there waiting."



"Then after a long time, my brother said, 'Oh, what is that thing?' He coughed and then said, 'Do you see it, Adola?'"

"It was a patch of light, I thought. A second sun was hanging in the sky straight above us. Hundreds of people were dead and dying beside the road, and evil men were laughing when they shot more of us, and I wanted to talk to my brother and tried but I didn't have a voice, and then something touched me, touched my face and then reached through my skull, and the last words my brother said were, 'It is the devil, Adola. Fight the devil.'"

Then she stopped talking, crying for many reasons.

After a while, Tito said, "The master took you but not your brother."

"Which saddens me," she said. "And sometimes, makes me angry."

He held the girl and thought about his own past and how he came here, and eventually she stopped crying.

"The master is small," she repeated.

"I wouldn't feel it if it was in my hand," he said.

"And small in other ways," she said. "There are only so many quarters here, and the master can make room only when someone dies or goes home again. Which means whenever one person is saved, a million more of us are left behind."

He took a breath and held it.

"The master is empathy," she said. "But it is toughness too. Can you imagine? You have the power to save the wounded, the crippled. But you must select. You must somehow ignore those who suffer, and what kind of mind can do that for eons?"

"A great mind," he said.

And she waited for a moment. Then she said, "Great," while pushing her mouth against his neck. "We'll stop using that word when we talk about the master. All right, Tito?"

Any lunch is possible, but he has to put his desires into words. In effect, he can order only what he remembers from his life before and what other people have shared with him. Tito pretends to think before telling the master, "Jollof rice, please." Brenda makes a sound. "What's wrong with ham and cheese?"

"Jollof rice," he repeats.

"But it smells so bad, and it's spicy," she says.

He nods as if agreeing with every complaint, but in another moment the aroma of pepper and rice fills the room. Smiling, he stands and walks confidently to the remembered table.

This was Adola's favorite meal.

Brenda sits on the opposite side of the tiny table, bumping his leg as she sits. "Ham and cheese," she says. "Yum."

Tito picks up his big spoon and fills it and eats happily.

"I'd offer to share taste," she says. "But I don't eat crap."

He eats until thirsty and sets the spoon on his plate. Cool water waits in a tall glass. He drinks and listens. When Brenda reaches across the table, she grunts, just a little. Then she doesn't say anything else, waiting.

The spoon is missing. Tito knows it, but he reaches to where it was set before, letting his hand close on the air.

She watches and waits.

He puts his hand in his lap and says nothing.

"Why aren't you eating?" she teases.

"I'm full," he says.

She laughs at him.

After a moment, he asks, "What are your neighbors doing?"

"I don't know. Which neighbor?"

"The deep-cat."

They are called deep-cats because they are considered highly intelligent, second only to the master. "Oh, he's just sitting there, in his dump. Reading."

"You always call it a dump."

"Because they don't pick up after themselves. They're filthy creatures."

"Clutter makes them happy," he says.

"Who told you that?"

Tito says nothing.

"You've never talked to a deep-cat."

"Adola did," he says.

"She just pretended she did." Brenda sighs, frustrated that her game hasn't gone better. Leaning across the table, she sets the spoon back on his plate, not even trying to hide her motions.

He leaves the spoon there. He was hungry when he said he was full, but now his stomach is tiny and tight.

"Let's not talk about that woman," Brenda says.

"Adola?"

"Not even her name, please." She shifts her weight and sighs again. "You don't know this. How could you? But your little girlfriend was ugly. Not just plain, but homely."

"You've said that before," he says.

"Except you won't believe me."

Tito says nothing, waiting.

"And black," Brenda says. "In my life, I've never seen a blacker, uglier creature."

He feels sick now, keeping his mouth closed.

"Why do you keep bringing her up, Tito? She's gone."

"I know she's gone."

"You're in my house," Brenda says. "You should be polite to your hostess, whenever you get the chance."

"I should be," he agrees.

Brenda moves. She says, "He's looking at us now."

"The deep-cat?"

"A slob, but he is beautiful."

They were tall creatures with high, meat-fueled metabolisms. But despite being intelligent, their species had done considerable damage to their native world. The deep-cats brought here would die here. Even when the master nursed them back to perfect health, there was no place for them in their original home.

Brenda laughs. "I just flashed my tits at him," she says.

Tito picks up the spoon, as if ready to eat again.

"I don't think he likes that, seeing all this good flesh and no way to get over here and chew. You know?"

"Probably not," he says.

"Are you crying?" she asks.

"A little," he says. "It's the pepper, I think."

Tito remembers when he had eyes, and the eyes knew a house and yard and trees growing beneath a sky that changed from black to blue and then turned black again. With little prompting, he can see the woman standing beside him—a towering lady with black hair and a strange painful smile. She held his hand, the hand that was going to be lost. When she spoke, she used a firm voice that commanded attention. She wasn't his mother, but she insisted that he called her "Mama." His mother and

father had gone somewhere. Where they went was an important secret, and if he asked about them he would be paddled, or maybe some worse punishment would be delivered.

The two of them were standing on the busy corner outside their rundown little house. "You are such a good boy," the woman told him. She always said that, even when she was in a bad mood. It was important to be a good boy. That was the message that began every day. Then her strange smile widened, and she let go of the hand and patted him on the head. "No, I won't leave you. I can't ever leave you. This is a promise, and I never break my promises."

Why was she saying this? The little boy must have said something before, some question that prompted her reaction. But the grown, maimed man cannot remember those words.

The woman kneeled, despite a bad knee that made her wince. "Trust me. You must trust me."

"I do," said a tiny high voice.

"How old are you?"

The voice said, "Six."

"A perfect age," she said.

Six was six, and nothing about any age was perfect.

"Why are you crying?" she asked.

He can't recall crying now. But she touched his cheek and pulled back dampened fingertips.

"I do love you," she said.

He nodded.

"More than anything," she said.

He kept nodding.

Looking out into the street, she said, "When I was young." Then a car went past, and she took a long breath before talking again. "I wasn't much older than you. And my father, who was always a good man . . . a wonderful man . . . my father got involved with some awful things. Drugs. Powerful, wicked drugs that made him crazy. He was so angry and crazy, and I won't tell you, not ever, what he did. Or what my mother did to protect me. But living through those days . . . surviving the nights . . . that's why I'm strong today." Her hands were shaking, and she was crying. "Stronger than anybody else."

He followed her eyes, gazing out into the street. Then came the rough sound of a motor, and he turned and looked. A yellow box on wheels was rolling toward them.

The woman stood, wincing because of her knee. "That's not our bus. We want the city bus."

The city bus was bigger and nicer looking.

"Hold my hand," she said.

The yellow bus slowed and stopped, and a big door opened. Sitting in front was a gray-haired woman, fat and smiling. "I wasn't told," she called out. "First day of school, is it?"

When she wanted, the black-haired woman had a big smile. "No, the boy's being home schooled. We're waiting for the downtown line."

"Oh," said the driver, surprised.

"We're on a field trip. To the museum."

The boy wondered what a museum was, but he knew better than to ask.

Pressed at the bus windows were faces. Everybody but the driver was little, like him. Most of them were smiling, watching the strange boy and this tall odd woman standing at the corner. Taped to one window was a sign, one word written in capital letters.

"Well, he's a fine looking boy," the driver said. Then she winked at him and closed the door, and with a lurch and rattle the yellow bus drove away.

"What's that word?" he asked.

"In the window?"

"Yes."

"Purple."

"But it's a yellow bus."

She laughed and said, "It's probably the purple line." Then she held his hand tighter, just short of where it would hurt.

"Mama?" he said.

"Yes, honey?"

"I love you."

"I love you too. So much."

He leaned into the tall woman, and she stopped squeezing his hand.

"I am strong," she said.

"I know."

"Strong," she repeated. Then once again, just to be certain, "Strong."

Adola never kept secrets from Tito. Day by day, she was growing stronger and learning a little more of what she needed to know to live on the Earth again. She described her exercises, and she tried to explain what she was reading and writing. Smart adult humans were expected to read all day long, and they had to watch important television programs, and everyone was expected to absorb facts about famous people and pretty faces and big events that happened before anybody here was born. "Culture," Adola said. "For people, culture is more important than clothes. Clothes are just a little part of your culture. Though you can't blend in without knowing what to wear and when and why."

Tito had no idea what to wear. And he could never be strong.

Maybe half of the humans here would leave eventually. But they had to want to leave and work hard enough to learn how to blend in. The Earth would always be cruel, and odd people were most at risk. The master had sent home people that should have stayed here. The master mentioned this whenever telling Tito that he was lucky. "You will be cared for and happy until you die without pain. I will protect you. With every power at my disposal, I will keep you safe."

Being safe was good.

Thanking the master was polite and reasonable, and he was glad for every good thing that he enjoyed.

And Adola never lied. But then again, quite a lot went unmentioned.

In their earliest days, she liked to boast about her appetite, proving that her wounded stomach had healed. She was working hard with the weights and her dancing, and she was learning so much through books. There was no reliable school where she lived as a little girl, but once she had the chance, she was an excellent student. Tito brought his books with their bumpy words, and he brought books that spoke to him, strange voices reciting stories about invented people. But what he loved best was to hear this girl reading from her textbooks, even when the subjects made little sense. A train went at this speed and this much time passed and how far did it go, and the Queen of England was who, and who won the World Cup in 1999, and what did it mean when the temperature reached zero?

He didn't need to know any of this. He was never returning to the Earth. And maybe Adola wouldn't leave either. That was one fine hope that he kept secret from everyone, including himself.

They grew older, and one day she stopped boasting about her brain and the latest

lessons. The only thing she said was that every lesson was harder now, and she didn't know if she was smart enough and determined enough to succeed.

Believing her was easy, and Tito tried not to lie. But he wanted to tell her how much he wanted her to stay. Their days together meant everything. People weren't supposed to have favorites, but they were important to each other. He always imagined Adola when he was with other lovers. It didn't matter if they were apart. In his mind, he could talk to Adola, and she talked to the Tito in her mind. Sometimes he woke when he should be sleeping, like when he was a child. He would make no sound, listening to the silence in the compound, thinking about a life he didn't want, which meant that there was no Adola.

One day, she was quiet. She was happy to see him, but the endless talk vanished into nervous silence. He asked why. Five times, he pushed for some reason. At last she admitted that the master was making final preparations for her trip back to the Earth. It sounded as if this was the master's fault, and she was powerless. She explained how the Earth was full of people, and almost everybody there had friends and family. It was difficult to set one lost person into that chaos and have her blend in. Nothing about the master's tasks was easy, but this was especially hard.

"I am going to live in a big city," Adola said. "Big cities are better. A strange person can hide in plain view."

"You aren't strange," he said.

"But we all are," she said.

He sat still, listening to his own racing thoughts.

"I'm going to be an accountant," she said. "I'll have my own name and a life story that everyone will believe, and there will be an apartment where the mail will come to me. Where I'll sit and watch television and read books that I have never read, and I don't know what else I'll do."

"What is an accountant?" he asked.

"People who work with numbers. With other people's money." She made a soft, frustrated sound—unusual for her. "I told you this before. My job is very important."

"You didn't," he said.

"But I did." She paused, thinking back. Then she said, "I thought I did. Are you sure you were listening?"

"I always pay attention to you, Adola."

She didn't speak for a time.

"When will you leave?" he asked.

"Very soon."

He imagined that she was going tomorrow and they wouldn't touch again. Reaching for her voice, she caught his hand with both of hers and held it and bent close to say, "Twenty days from now."

He swallowed. Then he said, "And I'll follow you."

She didn't talk, surprised to hear that.

And he was startled too. But he had said the words, and he felt as if he had never believed anything more surely than this. "I'll learn what I have to learn, and the master will build a life for me too."

"Tito," she said, interrupting him.

But he couldn't stop talking about his sudden, impossible plans.

Then she set a warm hand on his mouth and kissed the back of her hand, and she kissed his scarred nose and the holes where eyes should be. She never told him that any of this was impossible, and she didn't encourage him. "Quiet please," she said once and then again. "Quiet please." Then Adola told him, "This is too hard to bear as it is, Tito."

Her hand dropped away, and he said, "Or you could."

"Could what?"

"Tell the master, 'No thank you,' and stay here. With your friends and the deep-cats. And with me."

Nothing happened. Adola sighed and sighed again, holding her breath, and then she sat back, putting air between them before saying, "No." With a slow, hard voice, she told him, "That isn't going to happen. No, no, no."

Brenda asks by not asking.

With a smiling voice, she says, "You look nice today."

"Thank you."

She waits and then asks, "How do you feel?"

"I feel fine," he says.

"Wonderful."

Tito sits at one end of Brenda's enclosure, listening to the deep-cat discussing some issue with nobody. Deep-cats are solitary creatures. They can entertain themselves all day with puzzles and mathematical conundrums. Adola claimed that they stalked problems like earthly cats attack mice. It is very rare for cats to visit one another, which must make them easier to care for than social, endlessly insecure humans.

Brenda drags her chair close to Tito's chair and sits.

He says nothing.

Her breathing is shallow and quick. She doesn't touch him, but he feels the heat of a hand near his face, and then the hand is gone.

"Your whiskers need a trim," she says.

"They do?"

"I'd be happy to."

He waits a moment before saying, "No thank you."

A slow exasperated sound ends in silence. She waits a very long while before asking, "Why not?"

"Why not what?"

"Why can't I trim your little beard?"

"You said I looked nice," he says. "I thought you did."

"It'll make you even nicer," she says.

The deep-cat has stopped talking. Maybe he is watching them.

Brenda shifts her weight. Then with each word flat and simple, she says, "Our day is almost done."

Tito nods. He says, "It feels late."

"And have I asked?" She leans closer. "Have I pestered you at all?"

"You've been very good," he admits.

"Good enough?"

Tito smiles in the direction of the deep-cat.

"You're just teasing me, aren't you?" Brenda touches herself. He knows the sound she makes when she touches her own body, and he waits for her voice to change, growing slower and distracted. "I hate being teased. I do."

"I'm not teasing."

"You are."

He smiles at her voice and says, "She likes my beard."

"Who does?"

He doesn't answer.

Brenda stops rubbing herself. A sour, angry sound comes out of her, but she doesn't say anything. She doesn't trust herself to talk.

"I think about the master," he says.

"What's that?"

"Day by day," he says. "Isn't it amazing what the master can do?"

"The master is incredible," she says.

Tito nods and scratches his scalp, his face, and then his ragged beard. "Why do you think it does all of this?"

"Does what?"

"Everything." He makes a sweeping motion with his arm. "It must be a lot of work, one creature caring for all of us."

"Yet the master does it."

"But only us. At least there aren't any others that we can see."

"You can't see anything," she teases.

Tito ignores her. Imagining the deep-cat, he says, "Obviously the master likes this work, this burden. But no matter how fantastic its powers, our keeper has only so many hands and so much patience."

"The master is great," Brenda says.

"And it loves this work," he says.

She says, "Well, good then. Thank you, Master."

"It loves having us here," he says.

Brenda refastens her trousers. She isn't sure what to make of this conversation, much less how to react.

"But," he says. "But I don't think it really loves us."

She sighs.

"No, I don't think it can love." Tito nods and puts on a big sad smile, telling Brenda, "We're possessions, and of course we're thankful for being saved, and the master loves being the powerful ruler of this place and all of these complicated prizes."

"Prizes?"

"Us," he says. "The master is a collector. I think. Being nice to us is just part of the game it plays."

"The master loves me," says Brenda. "Every morning and every evening, that's what it tells me."

"Love' is a sound. It's a word keeping us happy in our cages."

"That's just crazy."

He doesn't respond.

"You don't know what you're saying," Brenda tells him.

He shrugs as if admitting that she might be right. Then he faces her voice and smiles in a different way, saying, "No, I don't want to have sex with you."

Brenda moans.

"Ever again," he says.

"Why not?"

"Because you're disgusting and mean, and I don't like you. I've never liked you, and I never want to touch you again."

She hits him.

"That didn't hurt," he says.

Then with the scissors that she would have used on his beard, she does quite a bit more than hit him.

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The boy woke up in the middle of the night. He was alone in bed. The tall woman liked to sleep beside him. That would keep him safe, she said. But she was gone and someone was making noise in the bathroom, and he climbed down and crossed the hallway to see her kneeling, throwing up into the toilet. Some kind of bug had gotten inside her. That's what she told him. Her belly kept trying to empty itself even when nothing was left inside, and he watched her agony and felt sorry and felt other ways too.

He was still six, but an older six. He noticed more now. The woman finished throwing up but the sweat kept coming out of her face and from under her long arms, and she sobbed and said she was better when she wasn't, and she tried to stand but couldn't. Her legs went out from under her, and he backed away, and she looked at him in that way that meant quite a lot. She said, "Stay." Pointing a wet finger, she said, "Don't. You. Move."

He sat in the hallway, waiting.

He was six and watched television when she let him, usually after he was good all day, and he had noticed that most people wore special clothes to bed. They were clothes meant for sleeping in. But the tall woman insisted that they had to keep their normal clothes on all of the time. There might be an emergency. Bad people might come and try to steal him. He was that important, that valuable. She wouldn't let anyone take what was hers, and she didn't like him watching television because it was full of the wrong ideas, and he wasn't as good as he used to be. She said this more and more. She shook a finger at his sorry face, and she made him wear normal clothes to bed, and she didn't want him out of her sight, even when her insides began aching again.

She sat on the toilet the next time, and the next. It was almost morning when there wasn't anything left of the bug inside her, and she went to bed slowly and called him, "Such a good boy," and he stretched out beside her. She smelled wrong. Her skin was sour and her breath stank, and she said that she would take a little nap and then they would get up together and get busy with their day.

The tall woman never slept long or deeply.

Except that day was different. Her eyes closed and he lay still beside her, watching her eyes moving under the dark exhausted lids, and sometimes she muttered words and sometimes she only breathed. He watched her breathing and listened, and his mind ran in dangerous ways.

The sun came up, and he watched her.

Birds were singing outside, and they sang in his head. That's what happened when you heard anything. It happened in the world and it happened in your head. Then from past the bird songs came the purposeful rumbling of a school bus coming up the street, and before he could think, the boy was out of bed and running, counting the mighty steps toward the front door of a little house.

The master cured his aches and bandaged the wounds, managing to say nothing through the long process. Then Tito was placed on a bed inside the infirmary, suspended between sterile sheets, and maybe the master had left him. Or maybe it was close. He lay still and listened to the soft moaning of a hawk-beast freshly arrived from its horrible home world. Then to the silence, he said, "Blame me, Master. Please don't punish Brenda."

"She struck you," said the voice of rock. "If I hadn't intervened, you would have died."

Tito nodded, fingers lightly touching the closed gouge on his neck. "But you saved me. As always."

"Such a sorrowful day," the master said.

Tito closed his scabbed mouth.

"It will be a very long time before your friend can be trusted with anyone. And forever, I will have to take precautions."

"What about me, Master?"

"What about you?"

"You should punish me. I knew what I was doing. Nothing but words, but I made the woman furious."

"All right, Tito. What kind of punishment would be appropriate?"

"Don't let me visit other people."

"For how long?"

"Forever."

It is a remarkable thing, saying words to the master and not hearing an immediate, perfectly reasoned response. The voice isn't flustered when it returns, but there is a stiffness that Tito has never noticed before. "You are guilty of much, yes. But both of us realize that nobody else poses the same danger as Brenda."

"Are you certain? Did you hear me speaking to her?"

"I know what you said, Tito."

"I might have said worse."

Silence.

"What if I tell the next person that the master doesn't pick up the injured and maimed? I could claim that you visit the Earth and these other worlds just to watch the misery. Tragedies unfold beneath you, and what you like best you snatch up to bring here."

"Who would believe such a tale?"

"I do."

"You shouldn't."

"I have never asked, Master. When did you first see me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Was it when the house exploded into fire, or before that? Did you see the tall woman catch me? Or did you watch me run out to catch the purple bus? Or maybe you watched me for days and days, using your wisdom, knowing that something awful would happen soon."

"Tito. I do love you."

"Don't trust me with the others," he said. "I will tell them whatever it takes, and they won't look at you in the same way again."

"Then you won't visit anybody again."

"And I'll die of boredom and loneliness."

A second pause ends with the sensation of breath against the face. Then the weary voice asks, "What do you want from me, Tito?"

"You know," he says

Then after a moment, he adds, "Or you know nothing at all about me."

The bus nearly drove past. The little boy stood at the curb and waved, and it was the children in back who noticed him and screamed with one great happy voice, a dozen curious faces staring down through dirty glass. The fat woman stomped on the brakes and opened the door as he ran alongside, and then he leaped up onto the bottom step, too happy and too breathless to speak.

"Now are you going to school?" she asked.

He nodded, believing that was best.

The driver had a nice smile, and then she wasn't smiling. Her gaze lifted, and she squirmed uneasily in the chair. To somebody else, she said, "Hello there."

A smelly hand grabbed the boy by the elbow, and the tall woman yanked hard enough to pull him off his feet.

The driver said a bad word.

"Why are you out here?" the tall woman asked. Then she shook him hard and pulled him down onto the curb, and she grabbed both shoulders, trying to shove him down into the weedy, uncut lawn.

"What are you doing?" the driver asked. "Lady. What are you doing?"

"Come with me," said the tall woman.

The boy was picked up and carried. But the woman was exhausted from being sick, and she couldn't hold tight. He managed to slip free and jump back onto the steps, and with a voice louder than anything that had ever come out of him, he screamed, "She's not my mother. She stole me from my parents."

Again, he was carried away.

Horried, the driver watched boy and woman wrestle their way across the yard. Then she finally pulled a little phone out of her pocket and punched buttons and started to yell.

The tall woman dragged the boy inside.

He hit her and wished he could hit her again, but even sick, she was so much larger and stronger. And all of the anger that she had shown in her life was nothing like the rage that took hold of her now.

She didn't stop hitting him until the police pulled up.

Cursing, she lifted the blind and dropped it and looked hard at this boy that had been so very bad. She explained just how awful he was as she dragged him into the kitchen and grabbed a steak knife and a little pack of matches before hurrying into the basement. Her knee hurt, and the steps were steep, and those were new reasons to be angry. But her thinking was clear. She knew precisely what she was doing. Weeks and weeks ago, she dreamed up this plan for when the worst happened, and the worst always happened. A length of decrepit black hose brought natural gas into the house, and the long knife let her cut through the hose, the gas flowing like an endless stinking breath.

Bleeding, the boy sat on the floor, too weak to stand.

The air turned foul and close, and both of them coughed. "This is where you put us," she said. "You stupid bastard."

A knock sounded at the front door.

The doorbell rang.

The boy called out, and she struck him.

He coughed and she coughed harder, and he tried to stand, and she threw him onto his back and said, "Look at me."

His eyes were closed. He didn't want to look.

"I said look at me."

At last the front door was forced open, and big men with powerful, important feet were walking above their heads.

The boy shook his head and bit her empty hand.

She never spoke another word. The pack of matches was in her mouth. Using the tip of the knife, she carved away at those hard-closed eyes, at the stubborn lids, even while the face struggled and screamed in her bleeding hand. Somewhere the matches fell away and were lost. It didn't matter. The front door had been left open, cool morning air slipping inside, and that's when the ancient furnace decided to turn on—a wet snap and a blue spark becoming a fierce blue explosion that was everywhere at once, and the blast threw a chunk of steel into his flailing arm, and he remained awake and in agony, aware of everything including his endless misery, and he screamed until that strange second light decided to engulf both of them, taking only one.

"I wish to purchase a ticket."

"Destination?"

"Lagos."

The dispatcher looks at him and says nothing. There are several reasons for silence, all good.

"Lagos, Nigeria," says the mutilated man.

"Now, sir." He starts to laugh and then stops, knowing how that looks. Laughing at a blind man and all. He settles for a meaningful sigh, saying, "There is this problem, sir. We don't drive there."

"I know."

"This is a bus station."

"Of course it is." The blind man has one arm and a hidden stump, and he has a little beard, and he's dressed in a fine suit and wonderful fat tie. A small leather suitcase is set on the floor beneath his hand. There's money in his appearance, and he doesn't belong here. Everybody stares. He looks prosperous and helpless, and those who don't want to rob him are terrified for him.

"Where did you come from?" the dispatcher asks.

The blind man smiles. "That is an interesting story."

Then he says nothing.

Pieces of his face have been burned, and a fresh cut marks his scrawny neck. The dispatcher is thankful for the sunglasses. Blind eyes really creep him out.

"I haven't been here very long," says the customer. "Really, I don't know much about much. I am sorry. There was something of a rush to get me to this place. But I insisted, and this is where I'll begin."

"All right, sir."

"Lagos," he repeats.

"That is on another continent, and this is a bus station."

"But you know where it is?"

"In a general way, sure."

"Are you a good man?"

The dispatcher nearly says, "Yes." But the question is so serious and the customer so unexpected that he stands silent for a moment, considering his response. Then with cautious surety, he says, "Generally good, yes."

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"I'm thinking of hiring you."

"Sir?"

"Are you black?"

He takes a breath. He says, "Yes."

"Lagos is a black city, as I understand it."

The dispatcher looks at the people waiting in line and the other travelers and then at his dumbfounded co-workers. "What are you telling me?"

"I have money."

"Great."

From the pocket of his trousers comes a roll of bills. The blind man tries to set them on the counter, and the roll misses and drops, and the college kid behind him scoops up the money, turning in his fingers, and he's shaking from excitement when he sets the roll in front of the dispatcher.

"Shit," says the dispatcher.

"And do you have a passport?" asks the blind man. "I have been told that we need passports."

"I got one. So what?"

"Of course I have mine." The little book comes out of another pocket. "And I'm supposed to ask you: Are you on any watch lists?"

"Not that I know of."

"What else?" The blind man closes his mouth, thinking.

"You really want to hire me?"

"Yes, sir. I'll need help to get where I'm going."

"Lagos."

"Yes."

"Except you don't know me."

"But as you said, you are a good man."

The dispatcher leans against the counter, staring at the roll of hundred-dollar bills. He doesn't want to touch them. He barely has the breath to ask, "What would you pay me? If I helped, I mean."

"All of it."

"Shit."

"Minus our expenses, of course."

"Shit," he says again.

"There is someone I want to find in Lagos. It is important."

Finally, with a warm careful voice, the dispatcher says, "You're crazy. You know that."

"I am not." The little fellow straightens his back. "But if you want to know my story, google me. That's the term, right? Google me, and it's all there, a believable life story. You can read about my accident and the settlement. But if you think you can't take me to Lagos, I'll understand. I'll turn around now and find someone else willing to help me."

"Not here, no," says the dispatcher. Then he closes his window and comes around, telling the blind man, "Maybe you're sane. But this is nuts."

The little man nods and says nothing.

He has a nice smile. Sweet almost. And something about all of this is too perfect and incredible to refuse.

The worst thing that the dispatcher could think of saying is, "You know, people are going to stare and cause trouble, and I don't think I'm the best man to keep you safe on your little adventure."

The one hand rises, brushing aside the fears.

"The worst has already happened," says the blind man. "Trust me. We are going to have the times of our lives." ○

## NESFA Rules!

Who—or what—is a NESFA? The acronym stands for the New England Science Fiction Association, and you can find them at POB 809, Framingham, MA 01701. Or, more swiftly, online at [www.nesfa.org](http://www.nesfa.org). They are a fannish organization of deep roots and vast traditions, one of which is publishing books. The first NESFA Press volume was issued in 1972, so in just a short time the Press will mark forty years of book-making. As you might expect, they know how to do things properly by now.

NESFA Press, in a first for one of my columns, will be the whole topic this time around. Why? Because they are doing the Lord's work, and you need to support them. By focusing on reprinting the classics—and even some obscurities—of our field, they are keeping alive SF's heritage, entertaining the millions (we hope!) of representative genre readers, and educating new generations of writers.

In the March 2010 issue of *Locus*, Samuel Delany says, "I keep urging people not to forget the last hundred years of history. In 1911, Gernsback published *Ralph 124C41+*, and things have happened between then and now... The original texts that are so important to us were not written by academics. That's the stuff that has to be studied and paid attention to, especially if another generation wants to come out and do something that's better aesthetically. All aesthetic progress is a matter of taking advantage of the structures that are laid out by the previous generation and doing more with them. You have to know what was there in the first place."

Now, no one in their right mind would dare to call Chip Delany an "Old Fart."

Multicultural, plugged-in, hip, a perpetual revolutionary, at once a dedicated artist, academic, and stone genre fan, he represents the apex of what SF has accomplished.

And Chip is telling you it's not cool to be ignorant of the field's literary history.

Are you going to listen to him, or lightweight, short-sighted know-nothings who disparage everything ever written prior to the launch of Google Chrome?

I'm going with Chip, and that means reveling in the offerings of NESFA Press, a few of which are examined below.

## Poul Anderson

I think it's a fruitful accident that Volume 1 of *The Collected Short Works of Poul Anderson: Call Me Joe* (hardcover, \$29.00, 512 pages, ISBN 978-1-886778-75-2) opens with the title story now made famous as one of the myriad "inspirations" for Cameron's *Avatar*. When this book was being planned, no one knew of the film's details, so the focus on "Call Me Joe" is purely serendipitous. But that gives NESFA a great hook: "Read the story that inspired the hit film!"

Needless to say, Anderson's groundbreaking concept is at least as affecting as *Avatar*, in one-tenth of the space, and with more intellectual rigor and less preachiness. First appearing in 1957, the story holds up exceedingly well, proving once again that cinematic SF always remains fifty years behind written SF.

But there's plenty more in this first volume than movie templates, all of the stories working together to illustrate Anderson's vast range. Take something like "Journeys End," his well-known tale of the meeting of two telepaths. Purely humanist and emotional, something you might expect Connie Willis, say, to pro-

duce. "The Helping Hand" is as tough-minded a critique of cultural imperialism as anything being written today. "Backwardness" might have come from the acidic pen of William Tenn. "Flight to Forever" recalls van Vogt. And "Time Patrol" is pure adventure.

Anderson's famous ability to appeal to the reader's sensory empathy is on display everywhere. Take the opener to "Wildcat," for instance.

"It was raining again, hot and heavy out of a hidden sky, and the air stank with swamp. Herries could just see the tall derricks a mile away, under a floodlight glare, and hear their engines mutter. Further away, a bull brontosaur cried and thunder went through the night.

"Herries' boots resounded hollowly on the dock. Beneath the slicker, his clothes lay sweat-soggy, the rain spilled off his hat and down his collar . . ."

If you aren't fully inhabiting Anderson's depiction of the Jurassic just a few sentences into the story, you soon will be.

Is it too much also to hear a little Ballardian world-weariness and anomie in that opener? I think not, especially given that the story proves to be about the end of civilization. Anderson was no Pollyanna, and he knew and conveyed tragedy intimately. Yet at the same time, he remained generally optimistic about humanity's potential and destiny.

One additional quality that leaps out: Anderson's love of women and his ability to depict strong female protagonists, as in "The Sharing of Flesh."

Volume 2, *The Queen of Air and Darkness* (hardcover, \$29.00, 503 pages, ISBN 978-1-886778-87-6), continues the intelligent and attractive gameplan established by editor Rick Katze: to mix up stories of all types from all stages of Anderson's long career. Additionally, this time, along with more of the poems that were a "bonus" in Volume 1, we also get some fine essays on the nature of SF.

Some new chords in the Anderson symphony resound here. The award-winning title story opens this volume on a Gene Wolfish note. "Operation Afreet" is

a pioneer work of urban fantasy, and spiritual ancestor of the *Fables* comics. "A Little Knowledge" offers a taste of the legendary Polesotechnic League series. And of course, the themes from the first volume reappear, as with a second Time Patrol tale, "Brave to be a King"

These two volumes should whet your appetite for the ones to follow: at least two more are scheduled. By the end, you'll see why Anderson earned his Grandmaster status—and you will not even have considered his novels yet!

### James Blish

The name of James Blish is recalled today mainly for his critical outpourings—collected in such volumes as *The Issue at Hand* (1964)—and for his *Cities in Flight* quartet (1955-62), a milestone that never seems to go out of print for very long. Additionally, Blish will always have a footnote in SF as the first fellow ever to novelize the Star Trek franchise, way back in 1967. But naturally, as a professional hard-working writer, he turned out scads more original fiction, too much of it unjustifiably neglected these days. So it's a particular thrill to encounter *Flights of Eagles* (hardcover, \$29.00, 454 pages, ISBN 978-1-886778-86-3), which follows NESFA Press's previous Blish collection, *Works of Art* (2008).

The reader knows she's in for a treat as soon as she starts reading Tom Shippey's stimulating, dense, and closely reasoned introductory essay about the hybrid, genre-straddling nature of Blish's work, half genre, half modernist. But if such academic pursuits are alien to you, just jump right to the novel that opens the volume, *Welcome to Mars* (1967). Here you'll find 100 percent entertainment unmediated by scholarly discourse.

As finely constructed and as engaging as any Heinlein YA—and deserving to be as well known and respected—this book tells of the discovery of easy antigravity by brilliant teen Dolph Haertel. Haertel's first, highly impractical notion is to make his treehouse airtight, stock some provisions and oxygen, and take the



whole shebang to Mars—and so he does. But when a key component fails on the surface of the Red Planet, he seems doomed, left to attempt survival with a pathetic handful of tools and materials. And then, at that point, his girlfriend Nanette crashlands on the Red Planet in Dolph's packing crate prototype, bent on rescue but needing help herself.

Of course, the scientific details of Blish's Mars no longer conform entirely to what we know today, although there are still plenty of remaining correspondences, such as lodes of buried water. But what matters are two things: the utter respect that Blish paid to the best science and technology of his time; and the superior and engrossing narrative itself. Both these aspects of the book are immaculate, and insure that the reading pleasure to be derived is nearly as great as when the book first appeared.

Blish honors the scientific method and the implacable, fatal nature of the laws of physics: a universe that would kill a man without malice in a second. But he also champions humanity's ingenuity, sense of wonder, indomitableness, capacity for love and *joie de vivre*. This tale of maturation and exploration that Blish delivers—tinged with the genre's eternal romance with exotic aliens, however improbable—will never grow old or passé.

Next up is a second complete novel, *Jack of Eagles* (1952), Blish's first book-length outing. (Did I mention yet what great value these NESFA Press compilations are, containing as they do immense tracts of story for the money?) Blish sold his initial short story in 1940, so you can rightly assume that this novel will read as an assured debut, no amateur's stumbling crash out of the gate.

*Jack of Eagles* is a kind of SF novel I don't think is really being written any longer, because its subject matter has been subsumed into fantasy or horror. But once upon a time, when SF was the dominant and only mode of fantastika, the genre easily included tales of ESP and psionics—mainly at the behest of John Campbell, who was fascinated by

such stuff. Blish's usage of scientific reasoning and terminology to explain paranormal powers marks this book as pure SF, rather than any other kind of fantastika.

Blish's book concerns one Danny Caiden, an ordinary fellow who is peacefully idling along as a writer at a trade journal. Plagued in a minor way for his whole life by bouts of precognition and remote viewing, he suddenly finds his mental instabilities exfoliating into undeniable wild talents. Trying to exploit them, he discovers himself getting deeper and deeper into trouble and debt. Add in a greedy young woman named Marla and her overprotective brother, and the fun is just beginning.

Blish's somewhat cynical take on what would happen if extraordinary mental abilities were real is entirely typical of his worldview. He's something of a contrarian and a mordant anti-romantic, and his lifelong love for the works of James Branch Cabell give a hint as to his attitudes and outlooks on the oft-times farcical nature of existence. Nonetheless, his heroes continue admirably to strive and endure through principled behavior. Danny's climactic transcendence and utopian dreams are particularly touching and invigorating.

The third (short) novel, *Get Out of My Sky* (1957), concerns a solar system where two gravitationally linked planets feature populations who look at the universe through radically different cultural lenses. A study in understanding the Other, it looks forward to Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974).

Editor James Mann rounds out his selection with four stories. "The Thing in the Attic," despite its horror-genre title, is pure SF, concerning bio-modified humans and the jungle world they inhabit. "The Writing of the Rat" is another confrontation with otherness, as humanity comes face to face with the rodent-like galactic caretakers found on all the many abandoned worlds of the Milky Way. Tom Disch might very well have looked to "The Genius Heap" as inspira-

tion for his own *Camp Concentration* (1968), since the Blish piece also concerns an experimental colony of artists tweaked into higher states of ability. And finally, collaborating with Damon Knight, Blish turned out "Tiger Ride," in which the science of "ultronics" produces a sentient threat to the future of our species.

Owning a keen intellect, a well-developed sense of tragedy and farce, and a willingness to employ a rigorous calculus on an individual's behavior and motives, James Blish might very well have been the Platonic Ideal of an SF writer.

### Lester del Rey

The career of Lester del Rey falls neatly into two parts. The latter portion of his worklife was filled with book reviewing and book editing. And it is this stage of his life that is most problematical, and leaves the sourest taste in the mouths of many.

As a book reviewer, del Rey was notably mean-spirited, lazy, and retrogressive, opposed to innovation and change. I have a particular grudge against him, since he dissed *UnEarth* magazine, where I published my first story, as a worthless enterprise. Might I take this instance to remind folks that *UnEarth* also debuted William Gibson, Rudy Rucker, James Blaylock, Somtow Sucharitkul, Tim Sullivan, and others? Worthless? Hardly!

As a book editor, del Rey's tastes and commercial proclivities were problematical to many. So anyone viewing del Rey's life from this perspective alone might have cause to dismiss him out of hand.

But what about the young del Rey? Ah, there's the more interesting and worthwhile character! Excellent writer and magazine editor; mentor to many, including the young Harlan Ellison; progressive and revolutionary in his way; sociable founder of the fabled Hydra Club, and good friend to Fred Pohl. That's the version of del Rey we need to preserve. And thanks to NESFA Press, we can.

Editor Steven H. Silver has assembled two mammoth volumes that offer all the

evidence necessary to induct del Rey into the pantheon of classic SF forebears, the men and women who first uncovered the ore we all continue to mine to this day. The first book is titled *War and Space* (hardcover, \$29.00, 576 pages, ISBN 978-1-886778-76-4), while the second has been christened *Robots and Magic* (hardcover, \$29.00, 600 pages, ISBN 978-1-886778-88-7).

What can we say about del Rey the fiction writer, based on the stories in the first book? Let's consider his first publication, "The Faithful," from 1938. This story—reminiscent of Simak's *City* (1952), wherein mankind is gone, and dogs inherit the planet—is full of poignant melancholy, a sense of cosmic evolution, vivid scene-building, crisp dialogue, unique narrative voice and economy of setup. Del Rey clearly had all the requisite authorial talents even at age twenty-three.

His humble working-class background comes across in a story like "The Band Played On," whose hero is a spaceship pilot—on the garbage run! A devilish contrarian streak emerges in his famously blasphemous "For I Am a Jealous People!," which finds humanity pitted in war against the literal God of the Old Testament. "And It Comes Out Here" is not only an ingenious time-travel story to rival Heinlein, but also a stylistic tour de force, narrated in second-person present tense. "The Luck of Ignatz" shows del Rey doing excellent screwball comedy along the lines of *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), with a Venusian *zloaht* standing in for that film's leopard. The novella version of "Nerves" practically invents a new genre of medico-industrial near-future fiction. And "Moon-Blind" ventures into Fritz Leiber/Philip K. Dick territory with its surreal reality tampering. Additionally, there are stories that deliver more standardized thrills in more predictable, yet perfectly workmanlike fashion.

So overall, this first volume displays a writer of consummate technical skills who felt comfortable veering between experimental novelty and more cookie-cutter work, one whose general worldview

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tended toward the tragic—given the plethora of disasters in these stories.

As you might expect from its title, and its preponderance of copyrights citing *Weird Tales* and *Unknown Worlds*, the companion book highlights del Rey's facility with fanciful fiction—though high-quality hardcore SF abounds as well. A story like "The Pipes of Pan," with the Greek demigod becoming a jitterbugging musician, presages the work of Neil Gaiman, while "Though Poppies Grow" is a tragic tale of a fellow who doesn't know his own mortal condition. Del Rey's sardonic humor shows up in abundance, in such a story as "Hereafter, Inc.," where a tight-assed fellow finds the afterlife not to his liking.

Del Rey possessed a sentimental streak, most famously on display in "He-

len O'Loy," that mildly controversial depiction of a loving robot wife. But there's nothing wrong with some honest pathos, and other tales such as "Though Dreamers Die," which finds the last individual human passing on the race's legacy to robots, will evoke the expected tight throat as the author intended. By the time you reach Helen at book's end, you'll be applauding del Rey's range and skills.

During his prime, for roughly thirty years (1938-1968), Lester del Rey—after performing as John Campbell's reliable and unassuming pinch hitter—was an unsung, unflashy bulwark of the field, moving it ahead by incremental steps. His dedication and artistry surely offset any perceived failings of his later years, as these two essential volumes handily prove. ○

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The spring convention season gets off to an early start. Boskone (where I'll be), ConDFW, ConDor, Potlatch, StellarCon, FantaSciCon, and LunaCon (me again) are good—something near no matter where you live. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

## JANUARY 2011

29-30—Sci-Fi Expo. For info, write: 10 Hill St. #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) sciexpo.com/doc. (E-mail) info@sciexpo.com. Con will be held in: Richardson (Dallas) TX (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Dallas Convention Center. Guests will include: none announced at press time. Commercial expo for media SF, and toys.

## FEBRUARY 2011

4-6—Cre2c3ndo. [contabile.org.uk/cre2c3ndo](http://contabile.org.uk/cre2c3ndo). Grantham UK. H. Dale, B. Deschamps, M. Valtazanou. SF and fantasy folksinging.

11-13—EatonCon, c/o Conway, UCR Libraries, Box 5900, Riverside CA 92517. [eaton-collection.ucr.edu](http://eaton-collection.ucr.edu). Mike Davis. Academic.

18-20—Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. [boskone.org](http://boskone.org). Boston MA. Stross, C. Harris, Manchess, Neely.

18-20—ConDFW, 750 S. Main #14, Keller TX 76248. [condfw.org](http://condfw.org). Richardson (Dallas) TX. Sanderson, McDevitt. SF, fantasy, horror.

18-20—FarPoint, 11708 Troy Ct., Waldorf MD 20681. [farpointcon.com](http://farpointcon.com). Timonium (Baltimore) MD. Okrand, Weinstein. Star Trek, etc.

18-20—TrekTrax, Box 620605, Atlanta GA 30362. [trektrax.org](http://trektrax.org). Holiday Inn Perimeter. Tim Rush, B. Marsh, G. Walsh, DJ B-naut.

18-20—Katsucon, c/o Box 3354, Crofton MD 21114. [katsucon.org](http://katsucon.org). Gaylord National Resort, National Harbor MD (near DC). Anime.

18-20—Eternal Twilight, Box 5773, Milton Keynes MK10 1AS, UK. [massiveevents.co.uk](http://massiveevents.co.uk). Hilton, Birmingham UK. Julia Jones.

25-27—ConDor, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92175. [condor.org](http://condor.org). Town & Country Resort. A general SF and fantasy convention.

25-27—ConCave, 124 Fairlawn Ave., Lexington KY 40505. [concaveky.org](http://concaveky.org). Best Western Inn, Bowling Green KY. The Francises.

25-27—MystiCon. [mysticon-va.com](http://mysticon-va.com). Tanglewood Holiday Inn, Roanoke VA. Brinke Stevens, Allen Wold, Paul Dellinger, Mike Allen.

25-27—Furry Fiesta. [furryfiesta.org](http://furryfiesta.org). Addison (Dallas) TX (note changed city). "All Things Furry." Anthropomorphics.

25-27—Redemption, 61 Chaucer Rd., Farnborough GU14 8SP, UK. [smofcon.com/redemption](http://smofcon.com/redemption). Britannia Hotel, Coventry UK.

## MARCH 2011

4-6—StellarCon, Box F-4, EUC, UNCG, Greensboro NC 27413. [stellarcon.org](http://stellarcon.org). Best Western, High Point NC. T. McCaffrey, Elmore.

4-6—Wild Wild West Con, c/o Box 13904, Tempe AZ 85284. (623) 237-3663. [wildwildwestcon.com](http://wildwildwestcon.com). Tucson AZ. Steampunk.

4-6—Potlatch, Box 3400, Berkeley CA 94703. [potlatch-sf.org](http://potlatch-sf.org). Domain, Sunnyvale CA. Written speculative fiction; "Earth Abides."

10-13—EPICon. [epic-conference.com](http://epic-conference.com). Williamsburg VA. "Electronically Published Internet Connection." E-publishing conference.

11-13—FogCon. [fogcon.org](http://fogcon.org). Holiday Inn Golden Gateway, San Francisco CA. Pat Murphy, Jeff Vandermeer. "The City in SF"

11-13—RevelCon, c/o Box 130602, Houston TX 77219. [severalunlimited.com](http://severalunlimited.com). Relax-a-con for adult media fanzine fans.

11-13—ConJour, c/o UHCL Gamers' Guild, 2700 Bay Area Blvd. #198, Houston TX 77058. [conjour.net](http://conjour.net). J. L. Nye, P. L. Blair.

11-13—CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 38533. [coastcon.org](http://coastcon.org). Gulf Coast Coliseum. Jeff Dee, Jack Herman, J. Fisher. Much gaming.

11-13—AniIdaCon, c/o 1621 Heien #A, Boise ID 83705. [aniida.webs.com](http://aniida.webs.com). M. Coleman, T. Grant. "East Bound and Down." Anime.

18-20—LunaCon, Box 432, Bronx NY 10465. [lunacon.org](http://lunacon.org). Hilton, Rye Brook NY. Schoen, Mayo, Eric "in the elevator" Zuckerman.

18-20—FantaSciCon, 395 Stancil Rd., Rossville GA 30741. [fantasci.com](http://fantasci.com). Howard Johnson's Plaza Hotel, Chattanooga TN.

18-20—AllCon, Box 177194, Irving TX 75019. [all-con.org](http://all-con.org). Dallas, TX. Media and costuming emphasis.

18-20—Anime Matsuri. [animematsuri.com](http://animematsuri.com). Houston TX.

18-20—Zenkaicon, 421 Evergreen Ave., Hatboro PA 19040. [zenkaicon.com](http://zenkaicon.com). Valley Forge Convention Center, King of Prussia PA.

18-20—A & G Ohio, 3907 Chickadee Ct., Westerville OH 43081. [aandgohio.com](http://aandgohio.com). Cincinnati OH. Anime and gaming ("A & G").

## AUGUST 2011

17-21—RenoVation, Box 13278, Portland OR 97213. [renovationsforg](http://renovationsforg). Reno NV. Asher, C. Brown (I. M.), Powers. WorldCon. \$180.

## AUGUST 2012

30-Sep. 3—Chicon 7, Box 13, Skokie IL 60076. [chicon.org](http://chicon.org). Chicago IL. Resnick, Morrill, Musgrave, Scatzi. WorldCon. \$155.

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